



These Boots Are Made For Walking (Dressed to Kill #2)

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Category: Horror

Description: This ain't her first rodeo, but it could be her last ...

Still reeling from solving an innocent woman's murder, Maisie Friedman is ready to take a breather—even though the entire town knows her secret now. Enjoying some time with a friend to decompress is exactly what Maisie needs. But when her friend graciously gifts her with a pair of retro leather western boots, everything changes.

Just merely sliding the boots on catapults Maisie and her husband, Aaron, into another investigation of an innocent woman's mysterious death. Suspects keep turning up, each one making their job harder than ever, and the real murderer refuses to let the truth surface. With the looming possibility that Maisie will be silenced once and for all, it's up to Aaron and the other deputies to track down the criminal and try to pry Maisie from the clutches of a madman before it's too late.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Our anonymous source said that you discovered the identity of the killer by putting on a coat? How exactly does that work?”

When Maisey turned and glanced at Evan Singer, their attorney, his gaze told her to say next to nothing. “How could I possibly do that?”

“It’s something like being psychic?”

Maisey shook her head. “Even if that were true, who would believe me?”

“So how did you do it?” the woman from the local TV crew asked.

“Hunches. The right questions. Putting two and two together. It’s that simple. You’re talking to me as though I’m too stupid to see clues right in front of me. My husband is a trained detective, but all these years of being a social worker help me see through people’s lies to the truth. And that’s what we were looking for?the truth.”

“The coroner wouldn’t comment.” She wasn’t surprised at that. Aaron and Evan had already talked to Morgan, and he’d promised to say nothing. “But the suspect said that you knew exactly what he and the victim said on the night she died, and he seemed sort of afraid. And he said you were wearing her coat. What’s your comment on that?”

“I don’t know about the coat. It’s just a coat I picked up in a consignment store.”

“We heard it was the victim’s coat.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“How did you know to look for Colin Skidmore?”

“I didn’t. He found me. I didn’t even know him. My husband had to show me a picture of him so I’d know who he was.”

“So we’re supposed to believe that you knew nothing?”

“Believe what you want. I can’t change your mind, so I won’t even try.”

The woman seemed totally frustrated, and Maisey knew just how she felt. She’d been afraid none of the people she loved would believe her when she told them how she knew about Victoria Hunt’s death. Now she couldn’t make someone she didn’t know believe she had no idea what had happened. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t, she told herself.

“Do you think you’d ever take a job as a criminal investigator?”

“No. I just stumbled onto this. I’m not looking for more.” Well, that sure wasn’t a lie. She didn’t want any part of more of that stuff.

It took another thirty minutes of repeating herself before Maisey managed to get the reporter out the door. Evan had made a statement that she’d only be talking to one newspaper, one radio station, and one TV station. They purposely chose one of each from there in Corbin. The rest could go to hell for all she cared.

“Thanks, Evan. I really appreciate it. Of course, I know we’re paying you, so I don’t feel too bad,” Maisey said with a laugh as she walked him to the door.

“Look, I have to do a certain amount of pro bono work every year for the bar association. This is going to be mine for the year. You helped put away a murderer who stole the life of a beautiful young woman who’d never done anything to hurt anyone, and I appreciate that.”

“Oh, but you don’t have to?”

“No, but I’m going to. Tell Aaron I said hi and to buy you new clothes from now on!” He patted Maisie’s shoulder as he made his way out the front door and she watched him go, thankful that there was no one parked out there but him. Just as she closed the door, her phone rang, and it was the theme from Law & Order . “Hey!”

“You guys doing okay?”

Maisie was glad to hear Carly’s voice. “Yeah. I think we finally got rid of them. Evan just left, and that was my last interview, so maybe they’ll leave us alone.”

“I certainly hope so. I was just calling to invite you and Aaron to dinner tonight. And Murielle, of course,” she said with a chuckle. “I know it’s been hard the last few days.”

“It has. I appreciate that so much, and I’ll take you up on your offer. What time?”

“Six-ish?”

“Sure. What can I bring?”

“Nothing but a smile, your husband, and your daughter. But I’m serious about that smile.”

“Okay. I think I can manage one. We’ll see you then.”

“Great.”

“And Carly?”

“Mmm-hmmm?”

“Thanks again.”

“You’re very welcome. What are friends for? See you at six-ish.”

There was a bag of chips on the countertop, so she picked them up, pulled a soda from the refrigerator, and sat down on the sofa. A game show was on, and she needed to just sit and chill for a bit. Her phone rang again, and she smiled. “Hey, babe.”

“Hey. You doing okay?”

“Yeah. Evan’s gone and so are the last of the reporters. I think I’m done. Oh, and Carly called and invited us to dinner.”

“Yeah. She told me she was going to. I told her I really appreciate that. You need some rest.”

“I think I’m going to go take a nap. Got anything you need me to do?”

“Nope. Just take care of yourself. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

By the time she got to the bedroom, she had her sweatpants off, and she pulled her sweatshirt off, pulled on her cotton gown, and crawled under the covers. One of the gifts Aaron’s parents had sent them for Christmas was a white noise machine. They’d

had it on a retailer's wish list because Maisey had thought it would be good to have when Aaron was working a different shift and had to sleep at a strange time. She reached over and turned the thing on, and the sound of static filled the air. For some reason, it interrupted her thoughts and let her drift off.

She woke up two hours later when the timer on the white noise machine turned it off, looked around the room, stretched, and sat up. Instead of immediately getting dressed, she wandered into the living room in her gown, then opened the door and reached for the mail. When she did, her foot hit something, and she looked down.

A box lay there, one with no address on it. At first, she was a little bit afraid. What if it was some kind of hate mail? Or a bomb? Nah, Maisey. That's ridiculous, she told herself as she gathered the mail from the mailbox and carried everything inside. Flipping through the mail from the mailbox, she pressed her foot to the opener on the kitchen trash can and started dropping the junk mail into it.

When she was finished with that, she grabbed a bottle of water, picked up the weird box, and sat down. It opened easily enough?it wasn't sealed?and she peered in.

It was a sweater, and not a particularly new one. As she held it up and looked at it, something fell to the floor, and she reached for it. It was a small envelope, so she opened it to find a pretty notecard inside. The handwriting inside the card was feminine.

Dear Mrs. Friedman,

I hate to ask you to do this, but I'm a heartbroken mother. My daughter died last year, and the coroner said it was suicide, but I just can't believe that. She was just twenty-two, full of light and life, and the idea that she'd kill herself is ridiculous, but no one seemed to want to take it any farther. If you could just put on her sweater and let me know if she really did commit suicide, it would be so much comfort to me. No one

can imagine the pain I feel because she chose to take her own life. I can't believe that's right. I understand if you don't want to do it, but I would really, really appreciate it. You don't have to talk to me. Just call my number below and leave a message.

Thank you so much if you choose to do this. If not, God bless you and your kids anyway. No mother should suffer like this.

D.

There was a number written underneath the message, and it looked local. The sweater was beautiful, and the mother hadn't said, but Maisiey was fairly certain she'd knitted it herself for her daughter. Or maybe the young woman's grandmother had done it. Regardless, it was a terribly sad thing, and even though Maisiey didn't want to do it, she felt compelled. Aaron would be so mad at her for wearing herself out, but she didn't know if she could live with herself if she didn't help the woman. And the phrase? God bless you and your kids anyway ?tore at Maisiey's heart. They'd talked about having a baby but hadn't made a decision. It was almost like the woman knew her love of children.

The sweater was about Maisiey's size, so she leaned forward, slipped an arm into it, and then pulled the other side around. Once her other arm was in it, she hesitated for a second, then sighed and pulled it on.

The room went dark, and she could see a pinpoint of light. In a few seconds, that pinpoint widened, and Maisiey found herself on the side of a bed in a small room. The curtains at the windows were pink and ruffled, and there were a few stuffed toys on the shelves in the corner. It was obvious to her that she was sitting on a bed. To her right was a small desk, and the person leaned forward, reached into a drawer, took out a piece of paper, then scooted back on the bed, leaning against the headboard. She picked up a book and put the paper on top of it to write. From that vantage point,

Maisey could see yet another wall and another bookcase. It was full of all kinds of books, and here and there were small trophies, framed certificates, and knick-knacks. As the person began to write, Maisey watched the letters form on the paper from the pencil in the right hand.

I'm so sorry. I know I'm hurting a lot of people but I just can't go on. It's too hard. No matter what I do, I fail. I'm 22 and I'm still living in my bedroom at my parents' house! How pathetic is that? I'm tired and confused all the time, and sometimes I wish I'd never been born. You won't have to help with my car payments and insurance anymore, or school, or food or anything else. I'm too much of a burden, and I'm sorry.

I love you all,

Allison

The person, who was apparently named Allison, folded the note and slipped it into a book on the desktop. A hand opened the top drawer of the desk and she pulled out a gun. Maisey didn't know what kind or caliber it was, and she didn't care. She wished something, anything, would happen to stop what she knew was about to happen. To her horror, the young woman lifted the gun and put the barrel in her mouth, and Maisey could taste the metal and feel its coolness. It was about to happen, and there was no way she could stop...

"My baby does the hanky-panky !" her phone blared, and the vision disappeared. It was Aaron's ringtone, and Maisey dove for it. "Hello?"

"Babe! You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." No, I'm not, but I'm not telling you! her mind shouted. "Just sitting here, reading a magazine." She grabbed one and flipped it open. There. I'm not

lying , she told herself. “What are you doing?”

“Thinking about dinner. Do you think we should pick up something to take with us?”

“I asked Carly and she said no, but I’d like to take something. Maybe a pie?”

“Sure. You want to make one?”

Maisey sighed. “How ’bout you just pick up some cupcakes at the bakery?”

“Sure. I can do that. Oh, and could you pick up Murielle from school? I got tapped for a funeral detail, so I’ll be a little later than usual.”

“No problem. I’ll get her. Love you,” she said, wishing she could get him off the phone.

“Um, love you too. Okay. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

“Bye, babe.” She smacked END on the phone’s screen and sat there, very nearly panting. He couldn’t know what she’d done. He’d be furious, and he’d have every right to be.

Closing her eyes, she tried to quiet her mind. She knew what she had to do, even though she didn’t want to. With shaking hands, she picked up the notecard and dialed the number at the bottom. It rang four times, then went to voicemail. “At the tone, please leave a message.” BEEP!

“Hi. This is Mrs.Friedman. I found your package. Before I say anything else, I need to tell you that I’m so, so sorry for your loss. I have a little stepdaughter and I don’t know what I’d do if we lost her. We almost did, and it was horrible. Here’s the hard part. I put on your daughter’s sweater. I don’t even know what to call you, so I’ll just

call you ma'am. Hope that's okay. Anyway, I put on the sweater, and I'm sorry, ma'am, but she put the gun in her mouth. Before she did that, she wrote you a note. I don't know if you've found it or not, but it's in a book by the bed. I didn't see the title, but it has a green cover. I know you know my husband is a deputy, so I'm going to put the sweater back in the box and leave it with the desk sergeant at the sheriff's department. You can pick it up tomorrow or the next day because I can't go down there today, but I want you to know that it'll be safe and I took good care of it. Please don't tell anyone I did this for you. Please? I'm exhausted, and I just can't keep doing this. Okay. Um, bye, and again, my condolences."

Maisey hit END and tossed the phone onto the sofa's cushion like it was on fire.

It was just a little after lunch, so she took a quick shower, got dressed, and headed to the fast-food place by the post office. She finished eating with plenty of time to spare, and she was very close to the consignment store, so she decided to go by and look around. It was a good thing they had more than clothes, because she sure didn't intend to ever buy any more secondhand clothing!

To her surprise, there was a big banner across the front window: " GOING OUT OF BUSINESS SALE!!!! ALL PRICES REDUCED!!!! " Maybe it would be a good time to pick up some stuff at really good prices. Maisey parked and wandered up the sidewalk, then opened the door and stepped in.

The bell on the door jingled and a voice called out, "Be right there!" The racks were full, so Maisey started going through them, picking up this and that, looking at it, and putting it back. She was getting ready to head toward the shoes when she heard that same voice. "Can I help... Oh. It's you ."

Maisey wheeled to find the same woman who had sold her the coat. "What do you mean, 'It's you '?"

“You. You’re the reason we’re going out of business, you and your ridiculous stories about dead people.”

The insinuation set Maisey’s blood boiling. “How is that hurting you?”

“People keep coming in here, buying stuff, and then bringing it back when it’s not ‘possessed.’ I’ve been working my tail off and making nothing. I can’t even make my rent this month. So I’ve got to close, and it’s your fault. The least you could’ve done is not tell anybody if you believed that malarky was real.”

“First off,” Maisey said, bristling, “I didn’t tell a soul. A friend’s daughter overheard me talking to her stepmother and another friend and called up the news outlets. I had nothing to do with that.”

“Oh, yeah? Why were you telling your friends?”

“Because one of them is SheriffMcEvers!” The woman looked a bit stunned. “Yeah. CarlyMcEvers knows all about this, and she believes me! She was with me when I put on the coat the last time and told them who the murderer was! And if you don’t believe me, go down to the jail and ask ColinSkidmore what I said to him when he tried to kill me. I told him everything? everything ?he and VictoriaHunt had said to each other as she was bleeding out. And yes, I felt the stab wound, felt the blood oozing out, felt myself dying every damn time I put that coat on , so don’t tell me I was making it all up! I’m exhausted from it all and I never wanted it to happen. I’m glad it’s over, and I’m sorry it’s caused you problems, but you have no idea what it’s done to me!” Maisey was shaking with rage. After everything she’d been through, including that morning and the sweater, to have someone accuse her of being an attention whore was too much to take.

The woman was silent, like she was rooted to the spot and didn’t know what to say. Finally, she mumbled, “Um, I’m really sorry. That really happened?”

Hot tears coursed down Maisey's cheeks. "Of course it really happened! I wouldn't make up stuff like that. It was too painful and too scary to lie about it. I didn't want it to happen. And once I figured out who the killer was, the visions stopped. I can put the coat on now and nothing happens, but I'm not even sure I want to ever wear it again. The whole thing was way too much. I never want to go through that again." It was taking everything she had to keep from sobbing. "And I'm sorry about your store. I never intended for that to happen, and the girl who called the news outlets is being punished. Her dad is really mad at her, and she really hurt us. It was a nightmare."

"Oh, honey, I'm really sorry. I didn't know... You know, now with all those stupid Tockity videos and stuff, people are always trying to be the next big thing, and it felt like that was... I'm sorry. I see that you're not like that. I hope this never happens to you again."

Maisey took the tissue the woman held out to her and wiped her nose. "Too late. This morning, some lady sent me a sweater and wanted me to tell her that her daughter didn't really commit suicide. She didn't want to believe the girl did that. But she did. I saw it. It was awful. At least now she knows. And I bet I get more too, and I want to help people, but nobody thinks about what this does to me. It's draining. If you want to call the TV station and have you and me on TV talking about why people shouldn't do this to your store, I'll be glad to. I don't want you to go out of business. You're a nice person. But I don't know what else to do."

"Maybe that would help. Hey, I could bring one of my sweaters in and hang it on the rack. You could put it on and say, 'See? Nothing happens. Isolated incident.' And maybe things would go back to normal."

"I'd gladly do that. Just set it up and I'll come down. We'll see if we can save your business. But I didn't do this on purpose, ma'am. Really, I didn't."

“Eh. I know. I see that now. And it’s Paulette. Maisey, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, it’s nice to talk to you, Maisey. But I think you need some rest.”

“Gotta go pick up my stepdaughter from school, but after that, we’re going to SheriffMcEvers’ house for dinner. And tomorrow night I’m letting my husband take me out for a steak dinner in London?where nobody knows me,” Maisey threw in.

“I hear ya! And I sure don’t blame you for that. You have a pleasant evening and stay away from cameras. If I can get that arranged, I’ll let you know.”

“Here. My number.” Maisey handed Paulette a business card. “Call me.”

“Will do. And here.” Paulette reached out to the vase on the counter and pulled out a long-stemmed red rose. “This is for you, for being a good person. We need more of those these days.”

Maisey teared up again. “Thank you. I appreciate it. I hope I talk to you soon.”

“Bye,” Paulette called out as Maisey stepped out onto the sidewalk. There were two women standing across the street in front of the drugstore, and they leaned in and started to whisper as they looked her way. Great. Just great , she thought as she walked to the car. But there was one thing she knew for sure.

She’d told Paulette about the sweater, so she had to tell Aaron. Keeping something like that from him was a really bad idea. Her peace had already been shattered. She didn’t want her marriage to meet the same fate.

Jaw set, Aaron drove toward the steakhouse the next evening, and Maisey wished

she'd waited until after dinner before she'd told him about the sweater. But she hadn't. And he was furious. "I thought this was over," he hissed from between clenched teeth. They never argued, and if they had a disagreement, they didn't say anything in front of Murielle. That was one of the reasons Maisy had brought it up while they were all in the car. She wasn't stupid.

"I did too, but what about that poor woman? Didn't she deserve to know?"

"MaisyMaureen," he said, and he rarely called her by her full name, so she knew he was serious, "you know I care. But I care more about you and what it does to you. Look at you!"

"What? What's wrong with the way I look?"

"You look exhausted, babe!" Good. We're back to babe. That's a good sign, Maisy thought. "I mean, dark circles under your eyes, your skin is?"

"What? What's my skin? Blotchy? Ugly?"

"No! Stop putting words in my mouth. You're not ugly. You're the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I bet you say that to all your psychics," she muttered.

"Did you say all my psychos? Because that's what?"

"Oh, so now I'm a psycho? Thanks a lot! I solved a crime that you guys didn't seem to be able to solve, and I'm a psycho? Wow. That's brilliant. So much for gratitude." She was seething, and she felt justified in feeling that way.

"I'm not saying you're a psycho."

“Because it sure sounded like?”

“No!” Aaron whipped the car into a parking lot, stopped, and slammed it into park. Then he turned toward Maisey. “You damn near got yourself killed.”

“I what ?”

“Sorry. You damn near got killed. And you scared me half to death.”

“Yeah? Well, you shoulda been me,” she mumbled under her breath as she turned to stare out the window.

There was warmth near her left hand, and then his engulfed it. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m just worried about you. What if people start doing that to you all the time? Sending you things like that? At some point, you’ll have to put an end to it.”

“Easiest way to do that would be to charge money,” she mumbled against the glass.

“Well, you’re right about that. You start telling people you’re going to charge for it, they’ll stop sending you stuff. And honestly, if it’s going to eat at you this way, I think you should. Charge money, I mean.”

“I suppose I could ask the sheriff’s department to pay me as a consultant,” she said, grinning even though she refused to look at him.

Aaron let out a snort. “Good luck with that.”

“Are we going to eat? I’m hungry,” Murielle whined from the back seat.

“Yes, baby. We’re going there now. Just had to talk about the menu,” Maisey said and cut her eyes toward Aaron. “We’re. Going. Now.” She watched him huff a little,

then slip the car into gear and pull back out onto the road.

Dinner was good. The best part was not being in Corbin where everyone knew them. At least they were fairly inconspicuous in London, although a couple of people stared and whispered. She was pretty sure they recognized her, but they didn't come over to the table. That was about all she could hope for.

By the time they got home, it was dark. Maisey saw it as soon as they drove up?a package on the porch. And she knew what that meant. When they walked up the porch steps, Aaron was carrying a sleeping Murielle, so Maisey unlocked the door and let them in, careful to keep him from seeing the box.

But when he'd put Murielle to bed and come back to the living room, Maisey was sitting there with the box. "What's that?" Instead of answering him, Maisey pursed her lips. "Oh, no. Not another one."

"I'm guessing it is. I'll just do this one and?"

"No, babe. Please don't."

"I have to. If I can help somebody, I need to. Let me open it and see..." She pulled the box open and stared down into it. There was a note on top of whatever it was, so she pulled the envelope out and opened it. Inside was a small card, plain, and she looked inside it.

Dear Mrs. Friedman,

I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't do this. But the coroner told me that my son killed himself, and I just don't believe that. Faegan was a sweet boy, smart, funny, who loved science magazines and silly TV shows. He had no reason to kill himself, especially not the way they said. I know it's asking a lot, but if you could just help

me, I'd so appreciate it.

Thank you,

Mrs. F.

The woman's phone number was under her signature line. Maisie dug down into the box and brought out a denim jacket. "Must've been the boy's." Aaron was reading the note and didn't comment. "What do you think?"

"I think you need to stop this."

Instead, Maisie drew the jacket up her arms and waited. In an instant, she could see herself in a small bedroom, and in her hands was a magazine. The name of the magazine suggested that it had extreme sexual content, and as she watched, the hands that seemed to be hers were opening it to a particular page and reading it. A voice quietly said, "Oh, this should be easy enough." Trying to focus, she looked at the page.

It was a photo exposé on autoerotic asphyxiation.

The body her consciousness was in stood and walked across the room. After clearing everything out of the way in the closet, the hands threw a cord over the closet rod, then dragged it around the neck. As she watched from inside the spirit's mind, she saw them tighten the cord, then watched as the hand crept downward, and she was pretty sure they were unzipping their...

"Shit!" Maisie's eyes flew open to find a startled Aaron staring at her. "Shit! Shit! Oh, shit!" she screamed as she peeled the jacket off and dropped it on the floor.

"Maisie, what? What happened?"

“Oh, this kid. Yeah. He definitely killed himself, although he didn’t mean to. That’s... Oh, that’s horrible.”

“What?”

She stared at him for a minute. “Autoerotic asphyxiation.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Oh, yeah. The Frasier boy.”

“You knew him?”

“No, but I remember the case. The mother insisted we didn’t do our jobs and that he couldn’t have done that.”

“Well, he did. I saw him doing it, unfortunately.”

“Did you see him...”

“What? No! No, that’s when I screamed and the vision went away, thank you Jesus. I don’t want to see that. Now I have to write a note to her and leave it and the jacket at the sheriff’s department.”

“And now will you quit doing this?”

“I hope nobody else asks me to, because I’m not sure I can.”

“Now it’s my turn to say thank you Jesus.” Aaron pulled her back onto the sofa to sit beside him. “But really, babe, no more. Please.”

Maisey felt horrible. These people needed answers, but why did she have to be the one to supply those answers? So far, the two she’d had didn’t want answers?they

wanted to feel better about what had happened, and she hadn't been able to give them that. Did she really want to keep doing that ? "Okay, babe. No more."

"That's my girl. Let's go to bed. I hate how tired you are when you're finished with that."

Maisey folded the jacket and put it back inside the box with the note on top of it before she closed the box lid. Then she realized that he'd been wearing the jacket when he'd...

Ick.

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CHAPTER TWO

When Maisey got home the next afternoon, there were four boxes on the front porch. There's no way that I'm going to do all of these. There won't be anything left of me, she told herself. Ten minutes later, she'd printed out a sign and put it on the storm door.

NOTICE: Any packages left here by private citizens will be removed and taken to the sheriff's department. They can be picked up there. We are not responsible for boxes that are damaged or stolen.

She set about pulling herself together to go to dinner in Somerset. She'd only been home about ten minutes when she heard the front door open and close and a big voice called out, "Maisey?"

"Back here, babe." Dress across her arm, she worked to see if she could find jewelry that would look good with it.

Aaron stopped in the bedroom doorway and stared at Maisey. "Love your sign. Those boxes were left out there today?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you're standing up for yourself. I'll load them into my cruiser and take them to the office tomorrow. About ready for dinner?"

"Yeah. Cherilyn will be here any minute to pick up Murielle."

An hour later, they were seated at a small table in the restaurant, and Maisey scanned her surroundings. Several people were shooting glances toward her, and she knew they recognized her from the TV coverage. “I’m sorry, Aaron. We’re drawing attention.”

He shrugged. “Nothing you can do about it. Ignore them. You don’t need to defend yourself against anything. You did nothing wrong.”

“I’m just sorry it’s affecting you.”

His smile was gentle. “No problem, angel. People are naturally curious, and there’s nothing we can do about that.”

All through dinner, Maisey tried to ignore the stares and whispers, but it was growing more and more difficult. Her food kept sticking in her throat, and it was getting harder and harder to swallow. Only half of her plate was clean when she could feel her eyes welling, and in no time hot tears were creeping down her cheeks. “Maise?” She couldn’t look up at Aaron. “Maise? Look at me, babe. Come on.” When she finally met his eyes, he was smiling, a gentle smile that warmed her heart. “I’ll take care of this.”

Before she could stop him, Aaron stood. Maisey had no idea what was about to happen, but she could already feel herself unraveling. He picked up his water glass and his butter knife. “Could I have everyone’s attention, please? Which shouldn’t be hard, because apparently we already do,” he called out, tapping his glass with the knife’s blade. When everyone turned to look, Aaron put down the glass and cut loose with that deep Texas drawl. “My name is Deputy Sheriff Aaron Friedman, and this is my wife, Maisey Friedman. And yes?she’s exactly who you think she is. We’re having a very hard time enjoying our meal, which we paid for just like y’all are paying for yours, because you’re all staring and whispering. You’re making her very uncomfortable.” Maisey’s cheeks felt like they were on fire. “So here’s the deal?I

love her, and I'd really like it if she could enjoy herself because she works hard helping to take care of kids who, frankly, none of you want to be bothered with. So thanks for your anticipated cooperation." And he sat back down.

A shadow fell across the table, and Maisey shuddered. In a second, they'd be ejected from the restaurant, and her humiliation would be complete. "Mrs.Friedman?" a quiet male voice said.

When she looked up, the man standing there had on a white shirt and black slacks. Before she could answer, he smiled down at her. "We want our customers to have a positive experience here. Your meal is comped, and I hope you'll come back another time. Please give us a call and we'll find a private section for you to sit in so you won't have to go through this again. And I'm so sorry this has happened. Please pick out a dessert too, and you'll be welcome to carry it home if you like. We'll gladly package it for you, and again, we're really sorry."

"Not your fault, sir," Maisey whispered, trying hard to stop crying. "But I appreciate you coming over here to talk to us."

"You're very welcome, ma'am. And by the way, sir," he said as he turned to Aaron, "every man in this room is terrified right now because they're afraid they're going to have to learn to be as loving to their wives as you are to yours. I think you should get the husband of the year award."

Aaron chuckled. "Thanks. This lady is my whole world, and I'll always defend her."

"That's how it should be. I'm happy for both of you. You just let us know if you need anything else. Have a great evening."

"Thank you, sir," Aaron said and nodded to the host before the man turned to walk away.

“Thank you,” Maisey whispered across the table to her husband.

“Baby, I love you more than life itself. I’ll always have your back. Now eat your dinner and know that I love you.”

“I know. I love you too.” Maisey tried to smile, but it was almost impossible. Aaron was suffering because of her, but she didn’t know what to do about it. It might’ve been easier to take if he was angry or upset, but he didn’t seem to mind.

They left with carryout boxes, one with cheesecake and the other with lava cake. She really expected that someone would follow them out and beg her to help them, but no one did, and for that she was thankful. The idea that Aaron would lose his job and she’d have to bail him out of county lockup for punching some insistent stranger would’ve really ruined the night.

And if anyone had tried to touch her, that was exactly where Aaron would’ve wound up.

Thank god for Saturday afternoons. Maisey, Cherilyn, and Carly got the kids together to play. Maisey thought it seemed a bit unfair to Carly, except that the two oldest girls, Maya and Candace, loved playing with the baby, so Carly actually got some adult time in. They’d decided to meet at the local park, and there was plenty for the kids to do. Murielle and Lara played in the splash park just a few hundred feet away with about eight other kids. Cherilyn had a cooler full of drinks, and about an hour after they got there, Maisey would order pizza for everybody. It was a pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

“What are you grinning about? You’ve been grinning like a Cheshire cat all afternoon,” Maisey asked Cherilyn.

“I’ve got something exciting to tell you guys.”

Carly perked up. “Yeah? What?”

The willowy blond clapped her hands together and beamed. “I’m getting a brand-new minivan!”

“Wow! That’s awesome!” Carly sang out. “Congratulations!”

“Yeah, and I’m paying for it myself!”

That was a curiosity to Maisey. “Did you get a job?”

“Yes and no. I’ve got a way to make money, so I’ve been working at it, and it’s paying off.”

Oh, shit, here it comes , Maisey told herself. There was little doubt in her mind that in the near future, she’d be having a “party” for makeup or pots and pans or some kind of cleaning solution she was supposed to sell to her friends and relatives to help Cherilyn out. “So what are you selling?”

“Shaw gave me five thousand dollars to get started. I get notices from all of the self-storage companies around here when they’re selling the contents of storage units for back rent, and I go to the sales. Every unit I buy is a gamble because I don’t know what’s in it, but I’ve sort of figured it out. Seems like the bigger the space, the more likely that it’ll have valuable stuff in it, so I try to hold out for the larger ones. I go to the sales and pick out the units that it seems no one is really interested in, and I’ve found some amazing stuff in some of them.”

“Define ‘amazing,’” Maisey demanded.

“One of them had four sets of Haviland china in it, complete sets, three regular and a holiday set. There were two sets of silverware in it too, and three sets of beautiful

crystal. I sold that stuff for a small fortune. Plus it also had a couple of paintings, so I did some research and found out they were fairly valuable. One went for over six thousand dollars at an art auction in Memphis.”

“No shit?” Carly belted out. “That’s amazing!”

“Yeah! I was so excited! I mean, there are duds too. I got into one that had a bunch of boxes of old books, and they were mostly crap, but I went through them and found two that were signed first editions. They weren’t worth a lot, but they paid for the purchase, and there were more things I sold from it, so it was okay. And I’ve learned to go on days when it’s raining. There are people who’ll show up on sunny days but don’t bother on rainy days. I’ve bought some really great units on rainy days. I paid about seven hundred for one of them and made over eleven grand off it.”

“Eleven grand? Are you serious?” Carly shrieked, then shook her head. “I’m in the wrong damn business,” she muttered.

“Yeah, nobody was more surprised than me. That particular unit had two furs, a box of really, really old vinyl?”

“Vinyl?” Maisey asked.

“Yeah. Albums.” The other two women nodded. “Several vintage designer handbags. And a lockbox of jewelry. And it was real too. I got over three thousand for one of the rings, and that was to a pawn shop owner. No telling what he got for it when he sold it.”

“How long have you been doing this?” Maisey asked.

“Couple of months. I have to be careful. It’s kind of addictive, and it’s easy to get emotionally caught up in the bidding. But Shaw says I have a real talent for it, and

he's very proud of me."

"I bet." Maisie was stunned. There was money to be had in that? She knew about the reality shows that featured people doing that, but she'd believed they were total setups. Apparently they were closer to real than she'd thought. "I don't want to do it? you know, buy and sell?but could I go sometime? I'd love to be there when you open one up and see what's in it."

"Sure! That would be fun! I'd love to have somebody there to see it with me. Shaw is always at the house with the kids, so he doesn't get to come. It would be a lot more fun with a friend there."

That sounded exciting to Maisie. "When are you going again?"

"Actually, I got a message that they're having a sale on Monday afternoon if you're game."

"Yes! I'll talk to Aaron, but I'm sure it'll be fine with him."

"Good. Sounds like a good time. Just let me know."

The three women went back to chatting about everything under the sun, but Maisie wouldn't forget. How exciting! She'd get to see a treasure just as the chest was being opened.

As compared to most of her days, it would be a lot of fun.

Maisie stood by and watched. As soon as they got there, Cheryl went to the office and signed in. Because it wasn't real estate, she didn't have to have a bank letter, but she had a certified copy of her bank account showing what she could afford, and they gave her a paddle with a number on it. Maisie almost snickered. It was a paint stirrer

from the local hardware store with a piece of posterboard stuck to it, but whatever. It still worked. And she was really surprised at the turnout. There were only six people there to bid. That would make Cherilyn's job a lot easier.

"Which ones?" she asked as Cherilyn rejoined her.

"Okay, here's the map with all of the units marked. Guthrie, the guy over there in the blue ball cap?"

"Yeah?"

"He'll bid on all the small ones. He's got a junk store, and whatever's in them, he'll take to his store and just put out. He's not picky. Same goes for Walt, the guy in the red jacket. He gets the small ones and has yard sales." Cherilyn studied the map for a minute. "These are the two I want to focus on," she said as she pointed to two large units on opposite corners of one building. "They'll be the ones with the most?" Her words were interrupted by a loud peal of thunder. "Aww, yeah. Mama's in luck today. Nobody else will show up. It'll be us. My biggest contender will be Astrid over there." With a name like Astrid, Maisey didn't have to ask. The middle-aged woman dressed in goth attire with dark purple hair and too much eye makeup had to be the aforementioned bidder. "She looks for weird stuff, and she's good at it too. She likes the bigger units, but we'll see what she does." A flash of lightning lit the sky. "This just gets better and better."

They started at the smaller units. As people purchased them, Maisey waited, but no one opened them. "Why aren't they opening them?"

"We don't get to open them until we've paid for them," Cherilyn explained.

"Oh. Right. That makes sense."

They walked along until they came to one of the bigger units. “Okay, here we go. Uh-oh.”

“What?” Maisey whispered.

“I don’t know her. She’s a wild card.” Cherilyn cut her eyes toward a woman who looked to be midtwenties and was very well-dressed.

“Guess you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“Yep. That just might be.”

The auctioneer stopped in front of the unit. “Okay, this is a twelve by twenty unit. Payments haven’t been made on it since last August. It was first rented three years ago.” There was another peal of thunder and, to Maisey’s dismay, a pelting rain started. She was really glad Cherilyn had talked her into wearing a raincoat. “Okay,” the auctioneer yelled over the din, “we’ll start the bidding at one hundred.” No one said a word. “Folks, I’m not standing out here in the weather for my health. Let’s get it started.” To Maisey’s surprise, Cherilyn looked around like she was totally disinterested. “Anybody? Anybody? Come on! At least?”

“I’ll start with fifty dollars,” Cherilyn called out in a voice that relayed total disgust.

“Fifty dollars? For a twelve by twenty?”

“I can do twenty-five if you’d like,” Cherilyn answered.

“Okay. Fifty it is. Do I hear a hundred?”

“Seventy-five,” the young woman called out.

“I have seventy-five. Anybody give me one hundred?” No one said a word. “Oh, come on! It’s gotta be worth a hundred!”

“Fine. A hundred,” Cherilyn called back.

“Okay! That’s better! I’ve got a hundred. How ’bout one fifty?” The young woman nodded. “I’ve got one fifty. Anybody got two?”

He waited and it seemed he was about to say something else when Cherilyn said, “Okay, two.”

“Two. That’s great. Two fifty. Can I get two fifty?”

“Two fifty,” the young woman sang out.

At that moment, the sky opened up, and the rain was nothing short of astounding. Several of the others who’d bid on smaller units ran for cover, and Maisie backed up until she was against the unit behind them. At least that gave her a little shelter. To her surprise, Cherilyn stood her ground. “I’ve got two fifty!” the auctioneer bellowed above the noise of the rain. “Can I get three hundred?” Maisie glanced at the young woman. She didn’t have on a raincoat, and she was drenched to the skin and shaking. “Two fifty! Two fifty going once, two fifty going twice...”

“Three hundred,” Cherilyn belted out.

“I’ve got three hundred!” The auctioneer glanced at the young woman, and before he asked if she wanted to bid, she turned and darted away. “Three hundred once, three hundred going twice, sold for three hundred to paddle fourteen!” Before he turned, he glared at Cherilyn. “I’ll let you have the other big one for a total of five hundred for both.”

“Sold,” Cherilyn said and nodded to him. “Come on!” she barked at Maisey and they both took off at a run toward the office.

“What do we do now?” Maisey asked as soon as Cherilyn had paid.

“Let’s go grab a sandwich and see if we can wait out the rain. If we can, we’ll come back and look inside.”

“Sounds good.”

An hour later, they stood in front of the first large unit, and the auctioneer, whose name turned out to be Chris, unlocked the unit. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks, Chris,” Cherilyn said and reached out toward him. “If you’ll go down and unlock the other one, here’s my padlock for it.”

“Sure thing. I’m going home after that. Y’all knock yourselves out.” He seemed totally disgusted at the afternoon’s lost revenue, but when he stepped away, Maisey caught Cherilyn’s eyes, and she was almost giddy.

“Okay, here we go! Can’t wait!” Her friend slid the latch sideways and threw the roll-up door open. When Maisey looked in, she gasped. “Holy shit,” Cherilyn whispered.

“Oh my god.” Hanging from the ceiling of the unit were three of the most elaborate, enormous crystal chandeliers Maisey had ever seen. “Those damn things...”

“Yeah. Let’s see what else is in here.” They started moving boxes around. “Nice furniture. Chippendale,” Cherilyn said, admiring a dining table and eight chairs.

“Yeah, and this china cabinet is gorgeous.”

“Yeah. Look at these paintings. All pastoral scenes. I’ll have to check on the artists.” The women prowled, and Maisey was astonished. There were literally thousands of dollars’ worth of goods in the unit.

“This is amazing,” she whispered to Cherilyn.

“Yeah. It’ll take weeks for me to go through all of this, but it looks like the storm is doubling back. Let’s run down to the other building and see what’s in there.”

When that door was flung open, Maisey was disappointed. It was total disarray, and most of it seemed to be old stuffed toys and clothes. “What do you do with this stuff?”

“Vintage things, like bags and coats, go for a lot, but most somewhat current clothing isn’t worth much. I’ll go through it and donate it to a local charity. There’s some glassware that might be decent, but that’s about it.”

“So none of these clothes are really worth anything?”

“No.”

Maisey spotted something in one of the piles. “So if I were to find something?”

“Honey, you’re my friend. You just stood out in a monsoon with me. If you see something you want, by all means, take it. I’ll make a fortune off that first building. This stuff... negligible. Help yourself.”

Maisey wandered to the pile she’d noticed. There, on top, was the prettiest pair of western boots she’d ever seen. She looked inside the top of the shaft?yep, her size?so she held them up. “Are you sure...”

“You want them, they’re yours. Come on. Let’s go before the weather gets any worse.”

They headed back to Maisey and Aaron’s, the boots in Maisey’s lap. They were cute, and she could see herself wearing them with a little sundress and a sweater. Aaron would like them for sure.

She dropped her raincoat on the front porch swing and stepped inside. “Hey, babe!” Aaron called out and grabbed her as soon as he saw her, then planted a big hot kiss right on her lips. He pulled back and grinned. “Have a good time?”

“Yeah. It was fun, even in the rain.”

“Did she find some good stuff?”

“Babe, she bought a unit for three hundred dollars that’s got at least twenty thousand dollars’ worth of stuff in it. It’s amazing.”

“Those aren’t worth twenty thousand,” he said and pointed at the boots. “Pink western boots?”

“Yeah, I thought they were cute. They were in another unit she bought. Most of the stuff in it wasn’t worth anything, so she told me to take anything I saw that I wanted. I remembered how many times you’ve tried to get me to wear a pair of these, so I grabbed them.”

“They’re adorable. Wonder how they’d look with a fringed bra and thong?”

“Lawd, boy, you’ve got a one-track mind!”

“Yeah, and you know where that track leads.” He kissed her again and grinned.

“Want something warm to drink?”

“Yes I do. It was chilly out there in the rain.”

An hour later, she was curled up in Aaron’s arms and drifting off to sleep. Just before she dipped, she cracked an eye open and peeked at those boots.

They sure were cute.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” Maisey whispered as she dropped her hand onto Aaron’s wrist, then dragged it up his arm to the back of his neck and ran it up the back of his head. She fisted a handful of hair and pulled his head back so she could look down into his face as she stood there behind the sofa. “And I think you’re gonna like it.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll be back in a minute.” Murielle had been in bed for a couple of hours, so she was sleeping the sleep of the dead. On the way home from work, Maisey had stopped at the adult store and done a little shopping, and she couldn’t wait for Aaron to see what she’d bought.

She slipped into the bedroom and opened the package. There was a pink suede string bikini top?it wasn’t real suede, but it looked like it?with a slit in the front of each cup to expose her nipples. The thong was a string-tied thing as well, and from it and the bra hung suede fringe. There were rhinestones and beads too, and it glittered in the low light of the bedroom. She’d bought the matching western hat, and she knew he’d like that too.

It took her a minute to get the bra and thong on right, but when she had, she looked in the mirror. Nice. The hat was adorable with it. Maisey sat down on the edge of the

bed and slipped on the left boot. It was a little loose, but that was okay. All it meant was that Aaron wouldn't have any trouble getting it off of her, which was fine. She slid her other foot down into the right boot.

Instantly, a hand grabbed her throat and lifted her, then slammed her against a wall. "Stop!" she screamed, trying to make sense of what was happening. "What are you doing? Stop! You're hurting me!"

"Hurting you? Bitch, you're gonna be nothing but a memory in a few minutes, and it'll be your fault. Where's that paperwork?" The other hand joined the first one and the choking became a crushing. Maisey couldn't speak or breathe, and she couldn't swallow. She could feel her eyes bugging slightly, and she kicked with all her might, but her boots didn't connect with anything, so she tried again. That time, she felt the right one loosen and drop from her foot.

The room stopped spinning and Maisey looked around. She was in their bedroom, lying on the floor, gasping for breath, but when she touched her neck, she could tell it was fine. The bedroom door burst open and Aaron stood over her. "Babe! What happened?"

"No. Oh, no. No, no, no. Not again."

"What? What happened? I heard you screaming!"

Maisey sat up, threw her hands over her face, and started to cry. "Not again! Please, no!"

"What, babe? What did... Oh, no. Not the boots." She nodded. "Oh, for the love of god. What the fuck? Is the universe seeking you out or something?"

Time stopped at his simple words. That was exactly what was happening. She wasn't

supposed to solve the crimes people sent to her. The crimes were supposed to find her . Maisey sat up slowly. “Yes. That’s precisely what’s happening. The universe is seeking me out, Aaron. I get it. That’s my job.”

“No, your job is to be a social worker.”

“Yes, but... I have to follow this. It’s my path. I understand that now.”

“So every fucking box that shows up on the porch is?”

“No, no! Don’t you get it? These things are looking for me . They’re seeking me out. Those are the only ones I’m supposed to get involved in.”

“Yeah, well, I wanted to get involved in that hot little number you’re wearing right now. Guess that’s not happening.”

“Uh, we can still?”

“No. And I apologize. That was really crass of me. Of course not. It had to be traumatic. What happened? What did you see?”

Maisey described the scene she’d experienced, and when she finished, she looked up at him. “Now what?”

“Now we find out who that storage unit was rented to. That’s where we start.”

Maisey’s heartbeat calmed. He said “we.” She wasn’t alone in it. And as long as she had Aaron as her backup, she’d be fine.

Always.

CHAPTER THREE

“Ready?”

Cherilyn and Shaw nodded. “Yep. Let’s do this,” Shaw said.

The bell on the door jingled as they stepped in, and a lady appeared from the room behind the counter. “Hi, y’all! Mrs.Harrison, right?”

Cherilyn smiled. “Yes.”

“What can I help y’all with?”

“I bought a storage unit’s contents the other day and I have some questions about it.”

“Okay. Let me get Chris out here. Hang on.” The woman disappeared and in a minute, she was back with the auctioneer. “Chris, Mrs.Harrison wants to talk to you about one of the units she bought.”

“Okay. How can I help you?”

“Chris, this is my husband, Conservation OfficerShaw Harrison, my friend, MaiseyFriedman, and her husband, Deputy SheriffAaron Friedman.”

“You were with Mrs.Harrison at the auction the other day,” Chris said and nodded toward Maisey.

“Yes, sir. I was.”

“How can I help you?”

“Sir, I need to know who rented that second unit before the sale. The one you threw in for good measure,” Aaron said without waiting for anyone else to say anything.

“I’m sorry, but that’s confidential information.”

Aaron pinned the man with a glare. “Mr....”

“Hurst. Chris Hurst.”

“Mr.Hurst, we have reason to believe that some of the goods inside that unit are evidence in a murder investigation.”

The auctioneer seemed to try to brush it off. “A murder investigation? I highly doubt that.”

Aaron’s fingers gripped either side of his tool belt as he planted his feet shoulder width apart, and the stance was intimidating from a guy his size. “Sir, I know for a fact that two of your units were raided a few weeks ago on a drug sweep, so don’t try to tell me nothing nefarious happens around here.”

“Now see here?”

“No, sir. You see here. I can get a warrant with little to no effort, but I’d rather not have to. We can keep this simple and friendly, or it can get complicated. And complicated can lead to implicated, if you know what I mean.” Shaw nodded too, and the man seemed to wilt.

“I don’t want to be implicated in anything like that.”

“Then help us. All I need is the name and contact information for the person who rented that unit.”

Hurst snatched up a piece of paper, flipped through a screen on the computer, and wrote some stuff down. “Here. Have at it. I doubt it’ll help, but it’s something.”

“Thank you for cooperating. If we need anything else, I’ll be back,” Aaron said with a little salute.

“You’ll need a warrant.”

Shaw held the door for the women and Aaron, then quipped, “You know, saying stuff like that makes you sound guilty.” The door closed before Hurst had a chance to say anything else.

“Well?” Shaw asked when they got to the vehicles.

“Maisey and I will take it from here. Thanks, guys.”

Cherilyn hugged Maisey. “I’m sorry this is happening.”

“I think this is how it’s supposed to be.” Maisey patted her friend’s back before they broke the hug. “I’ll be fine. I’ve got Aaron in my corner.”

“And you’ve got us, and Ross and Carly too,” Shaw pointed out. “Just sing out if you need us.”

“Thanks. We will.” She watched as they climbed into Shaw’s truck and drove away.

“Well, whadda we got?”

“Looks like a Mr.Lyle Fenton over on Wilmont Street,” Aaron said, staring at the paper.

“We going now?” Maisey asked.

He shrugged. “No time like the present.”

The house was a nondescript white clapboard thing with dark green shutters and no garage. The very first thing Maisey noticed was the grass. It obviously hadn’t been mowed in weeks. They climbed out of Aaron’s cruiser and made their way up the front sidewalk, weeds slapping at their pant legs. When Aaron rapped on the front door, no one came, but Maisey heard someone yell, “Yooohoo! Hello there!” They turned to find an elderly lady at the house next door, waving animatedly. “Hello! Can I help you?”

“Yes, ma’am. We’re looking for Mr.Fenton,” Aaron explained as he started across the lawn, and Maisey cringed. There’d be grass seeds all over his pant legs, and she’d have to deal with that when she did the laundry.

“I’m so sorry. He passed away about seven months ago, I guess it was. Can I help you with anything?”

“Can you tell us who’s living here now?”

“No one. He has a son and daughter, but they don’t live here. He had another daughter, but she died a while back.” That got Maisey’s full attention.

“Do you know how to reach them?” Aaron asked.

“No, I don’t.”

“You wouldn’t by any chance have a key to the house, would you?”

“Actually,” the lady answered, “I do. We had keys to each other’s houses for emergency purposes. Do you need a warrant to go in there?” she asked, but Maisie could tell it was an innocent question.

“No, ma’am. Just trying to find his next of kin.”

“Okay. Let me get it. Oh, by the way, my name is Shelly. ShellyMason.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m Deputy Sheriff Aaron Friedman, and this is my wife, Maisie.”

The woman stopped. “You’re the psychic lady.”

Here we go again , Maisie’s brain groused. “That’s what they call me, but I’m not.”

“Is there something going on with Mr.Fenton? Was he murdered?”

“No, ma’am. I just think I bought something at an auction that belongs to his family, and I’d like to return it.”

“Oh. I see. Okay. Be right back.” The Mason lady disappeared into her house.

Maisie turned to Aaron. “He had a daughter who died.”

“Yeah. I caught that. Interesting.”

“So I wonder?”

“Here we are!” Mrs.Mason called out and interrupted Maisie. “This is the key to the back door. Just help yourselves and bring it back when you’re finished. Oh, and if

you see a white casserole dish with blue flowers on it, that's mine. I took food over to him one night and never got it back."

"Yes, ma'am. We'll keep an eye out for it," Aaron assured her. They waited until Mrs. Mason disappeared again before Aaron opened the back door and they stepped inside.

It was like a time capsule. Nothing had been moved. Clean dishes sat on the drain rack and, sure enough, there was a white casserole dish with blue flowers on it lying there, its clear glass lid lying beside it. "Guess we're looking for an address book or something," Maisey whispered.

"You don't have to whisper, babe. There's no one here."

"I know, but it's weird."

"It's not that weird. We have to go into people's homes a few times a week to find next of kin information." As they stepped into the dining room area, Aaron made a beeline to a small spot on a cabinet that seemed to have an assortment of office-like things. "Here we go," he said and picked up a small book. "Address book. Looks like it's not new, but not terribly old."

"There's a filing cabinet over there. Maybe there are some papers in there that'll help us find his kids," Maisey said and pointed at it. She knew Aaron would look through it. Doing it herself didn't feel correct. He was the law enforcement officer, not her, and it felt like prying on her part.

Maisey wandered through the dining room and to the hallway. There were two bedrooms down the hallway, and a bathroom. The water in the toilet bowl was clean but mostly evaporated, and there was a ring of mildew at its upper edge. She wondered how long it had been since it had been flushed. When she cranked on the

handle of the sink faucet, nothing came out, so flushing the toilet would be useless. The bedrooms looked normal. One hadn't been touched. The other had a bed that had been slept in but not made, and she assumed it had been Mr. Fenton's bedroom.

Back in the living room, Maisey glanced around. There were magazines on the table, but they were old, so they'd come while he was still alive. Oddly, there was no mail on the floor under the mail slot. She wandered the room, looking at books, pieces of pottery and glassware, and furniture. But when she reached the bookcase in the far corner, something caught her eye. "Aaron?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"Come in here, please." Maisey picked up a picture in a frame and stared at it.

"Whatcha got, babe?"

"This picture."

"Yeah?"

"See this woman right here?" Maisey said and pointed to a face.

"Yeah?"

She turned to Aaron, her eyes wide. "She was at the auction the other day."

Aaron's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah? You're sure about that?"

"Positive. She was the only person who bid against Cherilyn."

"So she bid against Cherilyn on the unit that had the boots in it?"

“No. That’s the weird part. It wasn’t the unit that had the boots in it. The boots were in the other unit, the one Hurst threw in when it started to pour down rain and that woman gave up and left.”

“Could Fenton have rented both units?”

Maisey shrugged. “I’d say it was unlikely. The kinds of things in the first unit... This guy didn’t have that kind of money.”

“Okay. So could she have known he rented one but just didn’t know which one?”

“I guess that was possible. I mean, Hurst didn’t want to give us the information, but you got it out of him because you could threaten him. She had no leverage.”

“Right. But she was looking for something. At least that would be my guess.”

Maisey nodded. “Mine too. Can we take this picture?”

“As part of an investigation, yes. I’ll talk to Carly and open one. I didn’t find anything in that cabinet that gave me any information, but I bet Mrs.Mason next door might be able to tell us something. Come on. Let’s ask. And grab her casserole dish. That’ll make her more likely to talk.”

As they stepped out the back door, a voice called out, “Oh, good! You found it!”

“Yes, ma’am. Here ya go,” Maisey said and handed it back to the smiling woman. “Can’t afford to lose a good casserole dish.”

“Yeah, and it’s my favorite too. I’ve missed it.”

“So, Mrs. Mason?”

“Please, call me Shelly,” she told Aaron.

“Yes, Shelly, um, can you tell us who the people are in this picture?”

“Sure! That’s Lyle right there. The younger man is Kyle, his son. And the woman on the far left is his daughter, Evelyn.”

“And the other woman?” Aaron asked.

The woman’s voice dropped. “That’s his daughter who died. Carina.”

“And her last name was Fenton too?”

“I guess so. Pretty girl. Won some pageants when she was younger.”

“How long ago did she die?”

“Um, maybe three years ago?”

“Do the other two children live around here?”

“No. Evelyn lives in Lexington. Kyle lives... You know, I don’t know where he lives.”

“I noticed something,” Maisey interjected. “There was no mail on the floor under the mail slot. Do you pick up his mail?”

“No. I guess the kids had it forwarded.”

Maisey couldn’t think of anything else to ask. She could tell Aaron had picked up on that when he said, “I guess we should be going. If we think of anything else we need

to ask?”

“You just come back anytime. Anytime at all. I’ll be right here,” Shelly assured them.

“Well, thank you for your time and the information. Have a nice afternoon,” Aaron said and touched the brim of his hat. Maisey nodded and smiled, and the two of them headed back toward Aaron’s cruiser.

As soon as the car’s doors were closed, Maisey turned to Aaron. “Don’t say it. I know exactly where we’re going.”

“Yep. And you get to feast your eyes on the gorgeous Morgan again,” Aaron said with a laugh.

Maisey grinned. “I can hardly wait!”

The door closed softly behind them, and Maisey listened to the humming of the old fluorescent light fixtures in the suspended ceiling. A voice called out from somewhere deep inside the building, “Be right there!”

“It’s just Aaron and Maisey,” Aaron called back.

“Well, come on back then!”

They stepped into the hallway and wandered until they could hear Morgan’s voice again. “In the back.”

Sure enough, on a slab in the big room was a body, and it wasn’t fresh by any means. The only dead bodies Maisey had ever seen were dressed up and in caskets, and this one was anything but. At first glance, it was repulsive, but after she got over the initial shock, it was kind of fascinating. “What are you guys up to today?” Morgan

asked, and Maisey gave him the appreciative once over. His hair was pulled up in a bun, and his white lab coat was spotless.

“Up to no good,” Aaron said and gave him an elbow bump instead of reaching for his gloved hand.

Morgan laughed. “More unsolved mysteries?”

“You could say that.”

“Yeah. Me too. Trying to find out what really killed Mr. Carroll here. His doctor says it was an inoperable bowel obstruction, but his wife insists it was something aliens fed to him that grew inside him and completely ate up his internal organs.”

Aaron snickered. “Just make sure that whatever it is, it doesn’t get into you. Otherwise, the female population of this city will go into mourning.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. That one right there,” Morgan said and smiled as he pointed to Maisey, “only has eyes for you.”

“Good thing too. I’d hate to have to chain her to the porch post!” Aaron answered, laughing.

Morgan grinned at her. “Awww, I’d come getcha, Maisey.”

She snickered. “Thanks. I’d let you.”

“Oh-ho-ho! Your girl is frisky!” Morgan belted out, laughing.

“Yeah, well, we came here to find out about one who’s not quite so frisky anymore,” Aaron said, and Maisey almost laughed at the little hint of pink across his cheeks.

Tease me again and see what happens , she wanted to say, but she didn't.

"Another deceased one? Who ya got this time?"

"Young woman named Carina Fenton?" Aaron reached into his jacket and pulled out the picture. "Look familiar?"

Morgan stripped off his gloves, then took the photo and stared at it. "Uh, yeah. Let me look up her file. Hang on." He disappeared through a doorway in the back of the room and left Maisey and Aaron standing there.

The big "Y" incision had been made in the corpse, and Maisey sidled toward it to peek inside. "I've never seen inside a real person before."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "I have, unfortunately."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Not only unfortunately but also accidentally, as in I didn't want to see inside them but I had an accident scene or crime scene to process."

"You don't have people to do that?"

"Nope. We have to do that shit ourselves. We can get help if it's something so advanced that we don't know what to do, but otherwise, yeah, we have to do it. The department doesn't have the manpower or the money to hire crime scene people."

"Hey, Aaron?" Morgan's voice called out.

"Yeah?"

“You sure her name was CarinaFenton?”

Aaron glanced at Maisey and then back toward the doorway. “Uh, I assumed so. Her dad was LyleFenton.”

“I’m not finding the file.” It was quiet for a few seconds before he said, “You guys can come on back if you want to help me look.”

“Sure.” Aaron swept his arm toward the doorway and followed Maisey in.

The office was neat and orderly. Some specimen jars sat on the shelf, and Maisey decided she wanted to look at them later. Everything else was spotless. On the desk was a picture of Morgan and a little boy. “Cute little guy,” Maisey said aloud, even though she hadn’t meant to.

“Thanks. My nephew. Sister’s kid.” Morgan stopped riffling through the file and pointed to two more drawers. “If you guys can take a drawer apiece, that’ll help.”

Aaron nodded. “Sure.” He took the one closest to Morgan, and Maisey took the other one. She had to wonder if that was by design, keeping her farther away from Morgan. Surely Aaron didn’t feel threatened by the guy. He was gorgeous, but so was her husband, and she wasn’t interested in ever being with anyone other than Aaron. Maisey had never met anyone else who measured up to him in her mind.

They stood there, quietly going through the drawers, until Maisey saw something that made her stop. “Wait. Here’s a CarinaWilliamson. But that’s not?”

“Yeah, that’s her,” Morgan said and reached for the file.

“Her name wasn’t Fenton?” Aaron asked.

“No. Can’t remember...” Morgan flipped through the file. “This has been a while back. About three years, I think. Let me see... Yeah, shows her dad as LyleFenton, so I’m not sure... Hmmm. I don’t know why her name isn’t Fenton. Doesn’t say anything about a husband.”

“Maybe ex-husband?” Maisey offered.

“I dunno. I guess you could check some records and see if you could find out about that. But I remember her dad coming down to identify her.”

“Did her brother or sister come with him?” Aaron asked.

Morgan shook his head as he continued to peruse the file. “No. He was alone.”

“And she died of strangulation,” Maisey said quietly.

Morgan shook his head again. “No. She was strangled initially until she was unconscious, and then she was hit in the head. It was the blunt force trauma that killed her.”

“Oh, wow.” If that was the case, Maisey was glad she was unconscious before she took that blow. At least she didn’t suffer any more than the original choking. “What was she hit with?”

“A brick. They found it nearby with her blood all over it, some scalp tissue, and some hair too. No fingerprints though.”

“Wait! I remember this one!” Aaron barked. “Yeah, she was found in the alley behind her dad’s house! I’d totally forgotten about this.”

“Yeah. It was well after dark and from what they could tell, she’d taken some

garbage out, and whoever killed her ambushed her in the alley. Her dad was watching TV, and he realized a while later that she had never come back inside. When he checked, he found her car still there, so he was scared and called the sheriff's office. And that's when they found her."

"I remember the department's report. She was barely cold when they arrived. Said she'd only been dead for maybe thirty minutes. No one heard or saw anything. Most of the neighbors around there are older people, and a lot of them were already in bed or at least doing what Mr. Fenton was doing? watching TV. She was far enough from the house that no one could've heard her unless she screamed, and it was unlikely that she could've done that with someone's hands around her neck."

"So it wasn't a rope or something? It was hands?" Maisy asked.

"Yeah. And from what we could tell, male hands."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Because of the sizes of the finger marks. Too big for a woman's hands. And besides, women have trouble choking someone with their hands. It takes an enormous amount of strength, and most woman don't have it."

"But some do?" Maisy asked.

"Sure, I guess, but I haven't found any," Morgan answered decisively.

Maisy had a question that needed an answer. "Do you remember what she was wearing?"

"Yes, because it was so unusual. She was wearing a two-piece suit, like a woman's business suit, but it was bright pink. White blouse, pearl jewelry, and a pair of?"

“Bright pink western boots,” Maisey said to finish his sentence.

“How’d you know about... Oh, yeah. You must have the boots.” Morgan’s eyes looked sad, and she knew what he was thinking.

Maisey nodded. “Accidentally got hold of them. They were in a storage building her dad had rented, and my friend Cherilyn bought the contents at an auction. I liked them, so she told me I could have them, but when I put them on at home... Well, you can kinda guess what happened.”

“I can, based on what I’ve heard. Could you tell who killed her?”

“All I know was that the killer was a man. That’s it.”

“And that fits with what I found during the autopsy. The blow that killed her was so hard that it probably didn’t come from a woman either,” Morgan said in agreement. “So you’re looking for a man.”

“Looks that way,” Aaron said. “Maisey said whoever choked her was strong enough that they lifted her off her feet and slammed her against the wall. It was actually a garage door, one of those old wooden tip-up doors. We found strands of her hair and fibers from her clothes stuck in the peeling wood.”

“Sounds right. I wish I could be of more help, but that’s all I know. I’m sure your file at the department will have a lot more useful information in it,” Morgan said. “Would you like a copy of all of my information here?”

Aaron nodded. “Sure. That might come in handy. Thanks.”

Maisey watched as Morgan pulled all of the information from the file, ran it through the copier, and handed the short stack of papers to Aaron. “It’s not much, but it’s

what I've got."

"Hey, we appreciate it." Aaron shook Morgan's hand, and Maisey shot him a smile.

"You're very welcome. You know I'm always interested in helping. And Maisey, I'm sorry this keeps happening to you."

"Thanks." Maisey's mind was running a mile a minute with so much to take in, and in such a short time. They'd no sooner stepped outside than she turned to Aaron.

"Can we go pick up the file from the sheriff's department right now?"

"Sure. No reason why not. You can go in and tell Carly what's going on while I pull the file."

"Thanks, babe. I appreciate it."

"Anything for you, beautiful," Aaron said and leaned down to kiss her on the cheek.

The ride to the department was short, and Maisey wished it was longer. Every minute she could spend with Aaron was a dream come true. When she reached for his hand, he took hers and squeezed it tightly. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too," Aaron answered and lifted their joined hands to kiss the back of hers.

Tears were welling in her eyes and she couldn't stop them. "I'm sorry."

"Babe, you didn't do anything to invite this. It's not your fault." Aaron whipped the car into a parking lot, then unbuckled his seat belt, slid toward her, and wrapped his arms around her.

Maisey dissolved against his chest. Why did it keep happening to her? Her parents always gave her such shit about it, but if they knew what this “gift” cost her personally, they’d stop. “I’m just sorry you have to deal with it.”

“If I can do this for you, I’m not sorry about it. I’ll do anything for you, Maisey. You know that.” The kiss he feathered onto her forehead made her smile. “Now, you quit crying. You’re quite the crime-solver, girl! I’m really proud of you.”

“Proud?” Maisey pulled back and looked up into his face. “Why would you be proud?”

“Because I spent a lot of time at the academy, first for the FBI and then for the sheriff’s department, learning advanced criminal investigative techniques, and all you have to do is wake up and put on a pair of boots. Honestly, I’m a little jealous!” he said and snickered. “Now, let’s go get a milkshake and take a few minutes before we go to the office, okay?”

“Sure. Sounds good.” Maisey waited while he fastened his seat belt and pulled the vehicle out onto the street. A milkshake wouldn’t make up for the toll her gift took on her, on either of them, but it was a start.

“So you’ve got a murdered woman, a father who’s passed, a sister who showed up at the storage unit auction, a brother we know nothing about, and a pair of boots. Morgan told you how she died?”

Maisey nodded at Carly. “Yeah, exactly as I saw it.”

“Then sure. Take the file. Go through it. Let me know if you need any resources. We’ve already cleared one murder with your help. Let’s get another murderous asshole off the streets.” Aaron had already left the room and Maisey knew what he was doing. He was pulling the file.

“Thanks. And I appreciate you believing me when I say I saw it,” Maisey said, careful to show appreciation to her friend who was also her husband’s boss.

“Honey, I was there when you put on that jacket. I saw your reaction. That was no put-on, and you got the killer, so of course I believe you. Do I worry about you? Sure. Do we need your help? We can take all the help we can get.”

After they were in the car, Maisey opened the file. It was all the standard stuff. “Hey, there’s no copy of her birth certificate or a marriage certificate. Maybe we should try to get those.”

“Probably on that genealogy website.”

Maisey didn’t look up, just answered him. “Probably.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just tired of this. Wish I didn’t have to put up with it.”

“I wish you didn’t have to put up with it, but you didn’t ask for it. And I’m sorry you have to deal with it, babe.”

“Thanks.” She thought of something and pulled out her phone.

“Hey!” her friend answered.

“Hi. I was wondering... Have you been through all the stuff in the storage units yet?”

“Not yet. Some, but not most.”

“Have you by any chance run across any boxes of documents or things like that in the

storage unit that belonged to Mr.Fenton?”

“No, but if I do, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Cherilyn.”

“You’re welcome, hon. Talk to you soon.”

“Yep. Bye.” Maisey hit END and sighed. “Maybe she’ll find something.”

As soon as they got home, they started poring over the files. “You gonna log into that site?” Aaron asked Maisey.

“Yeah. I’ll do it right now.” Maisey’s mom had always been fascinated with genealogy, so she’d bought her mother a subscription to the website. Maisey still had the login information and could access it easily.

Laptop on her lap, Maisey logged into the Ancestor Tree account and typed in “CarinaFenton.” Less than five popped up. But when she changed it to “CarinaWilliamson,” quite a few popped up. One, however, stood out, so she clicked on it.

There was a list of documents available, so she poked through them. Not a single one of them was a marriage certificate. Then she went back to look at the birth certificates. There were at least eight or nine, but the third one caught her eye. “Hey, babe, what’s Carina’s birthdate?”

She could hear Aaron shuffling through the files. “Wait... Oh, here it is!” He called it back, and Maisey looked at the document. Sure enough, the birthdate matched.

But when she opened it up, she was surprised. “Hey, this is weird. Her name was

Williamson at birth, but her father's name was Fenton. He's listed here. Why didn't she have his name?"

"Where was she born?"

Maisey looked over the document. "Says Boise, Idaho."

"That's weird." In a few seconds, Aaron was peering over her shoulder at the computer screen. "So Williamson isn't a married name. It's her birth name."

"Looks like it. Don't the other two have Fenton as their last names? What were their first names?"

"Uhhh..." Aaron looked at the picture again. "Kyle and..."

Maisey sat for a few seconds, then said, "Evelyn."

"Yeah."

"Let's see if they're in here somewhere." Maisey tapped around on the keyboard, looking for their names. Sure enough, in a minute, a list of KyleFentons appeared, so she went down through them. The fourth one's father was Lyle. "Okay. This is the right Kyle. Let's see if I can find Evelyn." She poked around, but she found nothing. "Let me see if it shows up as EvelynWilliamson." There was no one by that name showing. "I don't know what her married name might be."

"Got access to Lyle's obituary?" Aaron asked.

"Of course! It would show up there! Hang on." Maisey poked around a little more and the obituary snapped into view. "Let's see..."

Mr.Fenton is survived by his son, KyleFenton, of Ashland; two daughters, EvelynColeman of Lexington, and CarinaWilliamson of Corbin; one grandchild, RachelColeman of Lexington; one sister, Enid Fenton Overby of Corbin; and several nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his parents and his wife, Bethany Eddings Fenton.

“Wait!” Maisey paged back to Carina’s birth certificate. “Look at the mother’s name.”

Ginger Williamson

“Now, let’s find Evelyn.” When she looked up EvelynFenton again, she saw one she hadn’t noticed before. “Oh. This is it. I missed it before. And her mother ... BethanyFenton. So Kyle and Evelyn are half brother and sister to Carina.”

“Interesting. Wonder if they know that?”

“I have to believe they do. I can’t get school records or medical records, so I don’t?”

“No, but I can get driver’s license info. Hang on.” Aaron spun the laptop toward himself and started typing. In under a minute, he said, “Uh-huh. Carina’s first driver’s license was issued in Idaho. That means she lived with her mother until sometime later.”

“Did Mr.Fenton not know he had a daughter?” Maisey mused.

“I guess it’s possible.”

“Wonder when he?” Her phone rang. “Cherilyn,” she said as she tapped the screen. “Hey, honey!”

“Hi. Listen, I started looking around a little and I found a bunch of boxes. Most of them were paperwork that belonged to Lyle, but I found three that are really interesting.”

“Yeah?”

“They’re full of stuff that belonged to his daughter, Carina.”

Maisey’s heartbeat doubled. “Could I look through them?”

Her friend laughed. “Shaw’s on his way to start his shift, so he’s already got them and he’s swinging by your house.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. Let me know if you find anything.”

“Will do. Bye.” Maisey hit END and grinned at Aaron. “Cherilyn found a bunch of boxes. Shaw is bringing them over.”

“Good! Maybe we’ll find something.”

Three hours later, they were knee-deep in musty papers. “Ugh. This is awful,” Maisey groaned.

“Yeah, but keep looking. Maybe we’ll find something.” The words had no more than escaped his lips when he lifted a shoebox out of the bigger box. “This is odd.” Aaron pulled the tape loose that held the top on, then opened it and looked inside. “Whoa. This may shed some light on things.”

He handed Maisey a bundle of envelopes and he took another. They were letters,

some addressed to GingerWilliamson, but most addressed to Lyle with Ginger's return address. Maisey chose one of the letters from Ginger and opened it.

Dearest love,

I hate to sound like a broken record, but I'd really like to know when you plan to leave Bethany. Our daughter isn't getting any younger, and she barely knows you. I know you feel a huge responsibility to Kyle and Evelyn, but staying with their mother for their sake isn't the thing to do.

"Holy shit," Maisey whispered. "He and Ginger were having an ongoing affair."

"Yeah, listen to this. 'Dearest Ginger, I can't wait to see you and our daughter. I'll be heading that way in a couple of weeks for another business trip, and this time it'll be for five days. I can barely contain my excitement at the prospect of playing with Carina and holding you in my arms. It's been too long.' Old Lyle was burning the candle at both ends," Aaron said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, seems pretty obvious what was going on there. How do we find out when Carina finally came here?"

"Well, from the obituary, we know that Bethany was already dead for part of the time Carina was here. When did Bethany die?"

Maisey checked the records. "The year Carina turned nineteen."

"Whaddya wanna bet she came here after his wife died? Is there a death certificate for Ginger somewhere?"

"I dunno. Let me look." It only took a couple of tries and, sure enough, the year that Carina turned twenty, her mother died. After pointing out the dates to Aaron, Maisey

pondered it aloud. “So her dad’s wife died when she was nineteen, and her mother when she was twenty. I’m betting she showed up here not long after that.”

“I bet you’re right. She would’ve gotten a new driver’s license when she moved here. Let me see if we can find out when that was and we’ll get a clearer picture.”

As Aaron called the licensing division, Maisey kept going through boxes. One of them had files in it, and the writing on the tabs was definitely a feminine hand. There were school records and a résumé in one, and tax information in another. Several more had assorted and various things in them, and then she found one labeled “Unclaimed Property.” That seemed unusual, so she opened it and started thumbing through it. Two papers in, she yelled out, “Aaron! I found something!”

His large presence loomed over her. “Whatcha got?”

Maisey grinned. “Look at this.” She handed it to him and watched his face as he read it.

Dear Miss Williamson,

Thank you for contacting the unclaimed property website. As we discussed in our earlier correspondence, the property we’ve found for your father has a total value of \$2,355,419.40. We’ve forwarded the appropriate forms to your email so that you can fill them out and have them notarized. Once we receive them, we can make disbursement of the funds.

These funds were the result of the sale of the Fenton Ironworks Company, dissolved in 1893. These funds were left untouched, and the balance represents both the proceeds of the sale and the interest it has drawn in the interim. We’re happy that you found your father’s unclaimed property, and hope to see a resolution of this in the near future.

Sincerely,

Ray Morris

Kentucky Department of Treasury

Unclaimed Property Division

“Holy shit. Her dad was due over two million dollars,” Aaron whispered.

“And you know what they say. Murders are always for either love or money,” Maisie said as she considered all the implications. “Wonder how her siblings felt about that?”

“Well,” Aaron said, folding his arms across his chest, “there’s only one way to find out. We’ll work on that tomorrow.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Dinner was finished and cleaned up, Murielle was finally in bed, and Maisy sat down on the sofa. Aaron was already in his recliner, remote in his hand. “Before you turn that on, I need to put on the boots again.”

“You sure you want to do that?” Aaron asked, but he put the remote down and turned his attention to her.

“Yeah. If I’m ever going to figure this out, I have to get a better grasp on it.”

“Well, okay. Let’s go in the bedroom and close the door.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Let’s go out onto the deck again. At least Murielle won’t be able to hear us out there.”

“Good idea.” Aaron stood, then reached for her hand and helped her stand. “Just be sure you’re ready.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

She took her usual seat on the ottoman, then slipped on the left boot. “Okay, here we go,” she whispered as she slid her right foot down into the other boot.

Everything went dark, but she could see some little glimmers of light here and there, and Maisy wondered if those were lights from the surrounding houses. That hand tightened around her neck again, but instead of panicking, she tried to keep her wits

about her. What did he sound like? Could she see his face? His eyes? His hair? Just like the guy from the first murder, he was wearing a hoodie and from what she could tell, gloves.

She could hear Carina's voice as the young woman cried out, "What are you doing? Stop! You're hurting me!"

A sickening laugh came from the man, something she hadn't noticed before in her panic. "Hurting you? Bitch, you're gonna be nothing but a memory in a few minutes, and it'll be your fault. Where's that paperwork?"

Maisey wanted to kick like she had the first time, but keeping the boots on was the only way she'd find out more, so she tried to sit very still. "How is it my fault? I'm doing it to help Dad! That's all!"

"Just hand over the paperwork and this will stop!"

"They wouldn't even... know about it... if it wasn't... for me," Carina wheezed as the hand tightened around her neck.

"Yeah, so thanks for that!" he barked and laughed again. "All of you can just go to hell for all I care." As he spoke, his voice grew quieter and quieter, and Maisey realized what was happening.

As soon as Carina lost consciousness, Maisey woke up. "What did you see?" Aaron asked anxiously as he helped her pull off the boots.

"This definitely had something to do with the money. He said, 'All of you can just go to hell for all I care.' What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know. Let's get some sleep and we'll tackle it in the morning." Maisey's legs

felt like spaghetti and she wobbled when she stood, so Aaron reached out and helped to steady her. “This takes a lot out of you. I hope it’s the last time this happens.”

“Me too. No more secondhand stuff for me. That’s for sure,” the short brunette told her tall husband. “So where do we start?”

“It was a man. So we’re going to start with Kyle. Let’s see what he has to say. That’s our jumping-off point, from where I stand anyway. Only makes sense.”

By the time they made it to the bedroom, Maisey had started stripping off her clothes to put on her nightgown. She was exhausted, and she knew Aaron could tell, because he didn’t make a move to initiate intimacy, just cuddled her against him. Being in his arms always made her feel loved and safe, and she was thankful for him.

As she drifted off to sleep, Maisey saw Carina, the Carina in the photo, not the one being strangled by an unknown man. She smiled and laughed, and she looked so happy. It was a pretty dream, a nice one, and she wished she could’ve met Carina. The younger woman looked like a pleasant person.

Maisey wanted to think they would’ve been friends.

The drive to Ashland was three hours, so they got Murielle off to school, stopped at the Waffle World in Lexington, and then drove on to Ashland. Maisey loved their blueberry waffles, and since they didn’t have one in Corbin, it was always a treat to eat there.

By the time they got into town, it was midday, but neither of them were hungry. According to the information Aaron had in the files from the first time Kyle was questioned, he worked at a company that sold commercial maintenance chemicals and paper supplies like janitors would use, so they stopped there. “Sorry. Kyle hasn’t worked here in a while,” the man at the front desk said. “Might want to try over at

Mighty Movers.”

“Thanks,” Aaron told the man as they left. “Looks like he’s changed jobs,” he told Maisey when they’d slipped into the car.

“Yep. Looks like it. Mighty Movers. Isn’t that the?”

“Yeah, the chain that rents equipment like trucks and trailers so people can move themselves. Bright red and yellow trucks.” They drove along until Aaron finally said, “There it is! Straight ahead.”

They rolled into the parking lot of the rental company, climbed out of the car, and headed for the building. A bell jingled on the door, but no one was behind the counter. They wandered around for a bit before a voice asked, “May I help you?”

“Oh! Yeah. You sure can,” Aaron answered, and Maisey turned to find him standing in front of a familiar face. “I’m looking for KyleFenton.” It took everything she had to keep from laughing. He most certainly knew that was Kyle in front of him. He was just testing to see what kind of response he’d get.

“I’m KyleFenton. Is there something I can do for you?” the man asked, and Maisey noted that there wasn’t any hesitation in his answer. He didn’t seem stressed at all.

“I hope so. I’m Deputy SheriffAaron Friedman, and this is my wife, Maisey. Our department has recently received information regarding your sister’s murder, and we wanted to talk to you about it, see if you’d remembered anything that you hadn’t told the officers before.”

Instead of standing behind the counter, Kyle stepped out in front of it, and his posture was relaxed and very non-threatening. The minute he stopped and leaned against the counter, Maisey’s mind was made up, but she said nothing. “No. I mean, I told them

everything I knew at the time.”

“It said in the file that you were already living here when it occurred?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve been here for quite some time. About eight years, I think.”

“It also says that you weren’t in Corbin the night she was killed.”

“No, sir. I was at a ballgame in Cincinnati with some friends.”

“Right. It said they corroborated your alibi.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is there anything you can remember about that time period that you can think of? Anything you didn’t tell the officers in the original interview?”

“No, sir. I told them everything I knew.”

Maisey knew Aaron was about to pounce. “Did you tell them about the money?”

“The money?”

“Yes. The unclaimed property money that Carina had found.”

“No. I didn’t think that mattered. Does it?”

“It might, if somebody thought getting rid of her would give them more of it,” Aaron said, his voice steady.

“Nope. That was Dad’s money. I don’t know if he ever got the money or not. I

haven't seen any of it."

"And his house is still sitting there. Are you planning to sell it?" Aaron asked.

"Eventually. My sister's dragging her feet. Every time I mention it, she goes on and on about how much work it'll be to clean it out and how she really doesn't have time. I'd just like to get it over with."

"I see. So you don't know what became of the money?"

"No. Carina was taking care of that. I wasn't there, so I just figured she'd gotten it for him and put it in an account somewhere. The attorney has all of that. Evelyn probably knows more about it than I do."

Aaron fixed him with a piercing glare. "But aren't you anxious to inherit some of that?"

"No." Kyle shifted his weight to his other hip, and Maisey expected him to fold his arms across his chest, but instead, he pressed one palm to the counter behind him, an open stance that said he was still relaxed. "Let me explain something to you about myself. I live a simple life. I don't have a lot, and I don't need a lot. Before I moved to Ashland, I was a..." He seemed to freeze and his eyes almost glazed over before he said, "I was a monk."

"A... A monk? Like with the brown dress thing and the rope belt and the funny haircut?" Maisey blurted out, stunned.

"Yes. A monk. And I fell in love with a woman who ran a bakery near the monastery. We made plans for me to leave the order so we could get married, so I resigned and got a job in town. But about three weeks before we were supposed to get married, she contracted viral meningitis and died."

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Maisey whispered.

“Thank you. It was quite a shock. After that, I moved here and I’ve been here ever since. I live in a two-room apartment, eat at home, don’t even have a pet. Matter of fact, I used to work at a place across town, but I found this job and I can walk to it, so I sold my car. I just don’t like having a lot of stuff, you know? So the money didn’t mean anything to me. I’ll just donate it to someone or something if I ever see any of it.”

“And you said you moved here. Where did you live prior?” Aaron asked.

“At the Monastery of Our Lady of Perpetual Benevolence outside Richmond. I went there when I was twenty and lived there until I came here. Prior to that, I lived with my parents.”

“Were you still living at home when Carina came to live with your dad?” Maisey asked.

“No. I’d already moved out. When she came to live there, Evelyn and I both were already gone.”

“Would you say you were close to her?” Aaron asked.

“Not at all. I mean, we didn’t even know about her until our mother died, and then Dad kind of sprang her on us. Then her mom died the next year and she moved to Corbin. Honestly, it was a bit of a shock. We had no idea he’d had another family. Very disappointing.”

Aaron gave him a knowing nod. “I can see how that would be. Did it harm your relationship with your dad?”

“A bit. Took me a little while to get past it. We’d always been taught to live a righteous life according to the Catholic faith, and I wasn’t expecting that. If I hadn’t already joined the order, that most definitely would’ve driven me to it.”

“I can see how that would be too. Did you maybe feel like Carina wouldn’t have been entitled to that money?”

“No. She was our dad’s child too, and besides, she was the one who found the money. If anyone deserved part of it, it was her. Regardless that I didn’t live there with her, I got along with Carina. She was a sweet soul, very kind and loving. She was a lot of help to Dad as he got older. I’ll always owe her a debt of gratitude for moving to Corbin to help him. That was really generous of her, considering he never lived with them the whole time she was growing up.”

Aaron nodded. “That’s sure true. She sounds like a very nice person.”

“She was. May I ask... How do you know about the unclaimed property?”

“A friend of ours purchased your dad’s storage unit and the boxes of documents were there. We’ve got them all at our house now.”

“I see. I suppose it’s part of the investigation right now?”

“It is. When we’re finished with it, it’ll go into unclaimed property on its own, and you’ll be able to pick it up?you or your sister.”

Kyle nodded. “Sounds fine. Thanks.”

“Well, we won’t keep you, Mr.Fenton, but if you can think of anything that might help us, or if you remember anything, please give me a call.” Aaron handed the man his card, and Kyle slipped it into his shirt pocket.

“Oh, by the way, you said you had new information?” Kyle asked.

“We’re not at liberty to discuss it. Ongoing investigation and all that,” Aaron said to cover.

“Gotcha. Well, please, if I can be of further help, just let me know. And thanks for not forgetting about her,” Kyle said as they moved toward the door.

“We won’t forget, Mr.Fenton. Thanks for your time.”

Aaron held the door as Maisey stepped outside, but neither of them spoke until they were in the car. He turned to Maisey and asked, “Well? Whaddya think?”

“It definitely wasn’t him.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Not tall enough. He’s not that much taller than me, and the man who killed Carina was standing over her. When he talked to her while he was choking her, he was looking down at her. That man in there? He’s not tall enough for that.”

“How tall was she?” Aaron asked, and Maisey grabbed the file with the documents Morgan had copied for them.

“Says here she was... five foot seven. Kyle may not even be that tall,” Maisey said as she closed the file folder.

“You’re right about that, plus she had on the boots, and the heels on those were at least an inch if not more.”

“Right. And the voice wasn’t even similar. So it couldn’t have been Kyle.” Maisey

sat there as Aaron started the car and pulled out onto the street, thinking. “By the way, I notice you didn’t ask him about Evelyn.”

“Nope. We’ll talk to Evelyn ourselves. No need. Besides, based on the things he said, if he believed Evelyn had been involved in any way, I think he would’ve said something. I really do think he’s that honest.”

Maisey nodded. “I do too. I feel good about his answers to the questions, and I felt good energy coming from him. He’s definitely not our killer, and I think he’d like to know who is.”

“I’m hoping we can come up with some answers for him. Right now, all we’re getting are more questions.”

“Yep. More questions.” They already had enough questions. It would be nice to get some answers.

Dinner was nice. Aaron grilled and Maisey took care of the sides, plus she’d put the ingredients in the bread maker before she left that morning, so they had fresh bread. “This is really good, Mommy,” Murielle said, talking while she chewed.

“Thank you, sweetie!” Every time Murielle said Mommy to Maisey, it thrilled the social worker. She didn’t want Murielle to forget Bailey, her real mother, but she was happy the child felt comfortable with her and loved her, because she certainly loved the little girl like her own.

“You’re a good cook. Daddy, can you take me to the skate park tomorrow? I want to ride my skateboard.”

“I don’t know. It’ll depend on what time I get finished at work with my reports and stuff, but I’ll try. Maybe Mom can take you,” he said, pointing toward Maisey.

“I want you to take me. There are big boys there who don’t like me being there, and I’m scared of them.” The child didn’t look up as she spoke, and it enraged Maisey that older, larger kids would be so unkind to smaller ones.

“You have every bit as much right to be there as they do, but yes. I’ll take you as soon as I get home if Mom doesn’t mind us being late for dinner,” Aaron said and winked at Maisey.

Maisey chuckled. “I don’t mind at all if you’ll pick up dinner on your way home!”

“We can do that. I’m sure the colonel has something we can eat,” Aaron said with a grin, referencing the world-famous chicken fast food restaurant that originated in Corbin. “But for now, eat your dinner. You’ve got some homework to finish.”

“I know. Math takes all night and I’m tired of it,” Murielle groused.

By the time dinner was finished and Maisey had cleaned up, Murielle’s math homework was finally done and she was ready for bed. Maisey and Aaron tucked her in, and as they walked out of the room, Murielle said, “I love you guys.”

“We love you too, sweetie,” Aaron said with a smile.

Maisey gave her a smile too. “We sure do. More than you’ll ever know.”

Murielle smiled. “Night-night.”

“Night, baby.” Aaron closed the door, then turned and threw his arms around Maisey, drawing her up against him tightly. It took her by surprise, so she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“What’s this about?” Maisey whispered.

“I love you. Thank you for loving Murielle. She loves you so much, Maise. She really does. As far as she’s concerned, you’re her mommy now.”

“As far as I’m concerned, she’s my daughter.”

“Would you like to make that official?” Aaron asked.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Never been surer of anything.”

“I’ll think about it. But we should talk to Bailey’s parents first. I don’t want them to think I’m trying to sever her from them.”

“I don’t think they’ll think that. But it’ll make legal and parental issues much easier to deal with. Right now, all you’ve got is guardianship. If you adopt her, she’ll be your child, and you can take care of anything I could.”

“True. Like I said, I’ll think about it. And now, I want to put those boots on.”

Aaron sighed and let Maisey lead him toward the bedroom. They undressed and slipped on night clothes, and then Maisey picked up the boots before she sat down at the foot of the bed. “Ready?”

Aaron nodded. “Yep. Ready.”

“Okay. Here we go.” As soon as the second boot was completely on, everything went dark, but Maisey waited, knowing it would come into focus quickly.

She had something in her hand? a garbage bag. Walking along the back fence, she opened the big rolling trash bin and dropped the bag in, then let the lid drop before

she turned. As soon as she did, a figure was standing there, light from behind it obscuring it. “Oh! Wha...” she barked out, shaken.

“You’re Carina, aren’t you?”

Maisey could feel the fear rising inside Carina’s body. “Yes. Who are you and what are you doing out here?”

“I wanted to talk to you, but not inside.”

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“You know what’s happening.”

She was shaking her head. “No. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do. And it’s important that you get that money.”

“Why? It’s for my dad.”

The figure snorted. “Somebody else needs it a lot worse.”

“I don’t know anything about that. You should go before?”

“Before what? I want the paperwork on that money.” He was advancing on her slowly, and Maisey could feel the panic Carina had experienced.

“I can’t do that. The legalities?”

“Yeah, but you can sign all of it and take care of it. And I’ll come pick it up.”

“Why should I do anything you say? I could just call the police.”

He grinned, and Maisy noted that there was something wrong with his smile, but she couldn't quite put a finger on it. “Now see, you never should've said that. Now I'll just have to find that paperwork and have somebody else finish it.”

“Like who?”

“You'll never know now, will you?”

He lunged at her, his hand gripping her throat. “Stop! What are you doing? Stop! You're hurting me!” Maisy heard her cry out.

“Hurting you? Bitch, you're gonna be nothing but a memory in a few minutes, and it'll be your fault. Where's that paperwork?” As he squeezed her neck with both hands, Maisy could feel the woman straining for breath.

“How is it my fault? I'm doing it to help Dad! That's all!”

“Just hand over the paperwork and this will stop!”

“They wouldn't even... know about it... if it wasn't... for me.” The hands squeezed tighter and tighter, and Maisy could feel the woman's resolve ebbing.

“Yeah, so thanks for that!” His sinister laughter filled the alley around them. “All of you can just go to hell for all I care. If he'd just done what he was told...” The voice trailed off, and Maisy felt herself falling into the darkness.

Once again, as soon as Carina was unconscious, Maisy's eyes flew open, her hands on her throat. She knew it wasn't real, but it certainly felt like it.

“Babe? You okay?” Aaron asked quietly.

“Yeah. I’m okay. I got the entire conversation this time, and we were right. It has something to do with that money. And he ended it with ‘If he’d just done what he was told...’ but I don’t know what that means.”

“You mean if Carina had just waited?”

“No. He said to Carina, ‘If he’d just done what he was told...’ and then the voice faded out.”

“Oh.” Aaron wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, then kissed her forehead. “Could you tell anything else about him?”

“Only that she didn’t know him, obviously.”

“Was he wearing any particular kind of clothes?” Maisey shook her head. “Or maybe jewelry?”

“I didn’t notice anything except the hoodie, but I’ll try to remember to pay attention to that next time.”

“Okay. I hope we crack this before there’s a next time.”

“I doubt that will happen,” Maisey answered, and she knew she was right. They didn’t have enough information, and they were a long way from solving the murder.

They’d interview Evelyn the next day. Maybe that would shed some light. So far, all they had were bits and pieces.

And darkness.

If there was anything Maisey hated, it was waking up to rain, and it was raining pitchforks and puppy dogs outside their bedroom window the next morning. According to her planner, there were four appointments scheduled before lunch. One of them was with a family she had no intention of visiting unless a police officer or deputy sheriff went with her, so Carly told Aaron to accompany her, and that was fine with Maisey.

For once, the family members behaved, and Maisey had to assume it was because Aaron was with her. There'd been a time before when the man had threatened to throw a coffee cup at her head, so their behavior that morning was a great improvement. Once they were back in the car, she reached over and took Aaron's hand. "Thanks for being here. They sure act a lot different when I'm not alone."

He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Good. Don't want anything to happen to my girl. Want to see if we can talk to Evelyn now?"

Maisey shrugged a little. "Sure. Might as well."

"According to all of the information we have, she works for a realtor in downtown Lexington."

It was barely an hour and a half drive to Lexington, and they passed the time laughing and talking. Aaron followed the mapping program and drove along until he got close. "I think it's right up here."

His cruiser slipped into a parking spot directly in front of a small storefront, and the sign on the front read Action Realty. Underneath the name was the line We Move Property . "Move it to where?" Aaron quipped.

Maisey smirked. "In this economy? From bank to bank." They ran through their case notes again, then headed into the business to see if Evelyn was there.

No one was at the front desk when they stepped inside, and there was no bell on the door. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. The occupants wouldn't have been able to hear the bell for the yelling match they were having in the back room. Maisey and Aaron glanced at each other, then stopped to listen.

"You agreed you'd pay it!" a woman's voice bellowed.

"I don't have the money!" a man countered.

"Well, I don't either! So now what? We tell her she can't go because we can't pay for it? You'll have to get a loan or something."

"And how am I supposed to do that? I don't have any collateral. You're the only one with collateral!"

Aaron cleared his throat. "A-hehehmmm" to get their attention, and they waited as the bickering stopped.

A door at the rear of the reception area opened and a woman stepped out. Maisey recognized her immediately from the picture at her dad's house but even more so from the auction. Evelyn. "Good morning! How are you today?"

"We're quite well, thanks," Maisey said. "I'm Maisey Friedman, and this is my husband, Aaron."

"Evelyn Coleman. How can I help you? Got a property you need to find a new owner for? Looking for that perfect little house to start a family?" Evelyn eyed Maisey, and she knew the woman was trying to remember where they'd seen each other before.

Aaron smiled politely. "No, ma'am. Actually, we recently received some new information on your sister's death, and I wondered if you'd have a minute to talk?"

A funny look passed over Evelyn's face, one that Maisey couldn't read. "Um, sure. I don't see why not. Would you care to sit down?" she asked and pointed to some chairs in the waiting area.

Just as they started to sit, Maisey heard a door close. To be correct, it was slammed. "Is someone else here?"

Evelyn let out what sounded like a fake chuckle. "Oh, that's just one of my agents leaving. Houses to show. So what kind of new information did you receive?"

"I can't really tell you much about that, since it's an ongoing investigation, but we're checking out all leads. Okay, so if I understand correctly, you were already out on your own when Carina moved in with your father." Aaron drew his notepad from his pocket and pulled the pencil from the side of it.

"Yes. I'd been gone several years. Got married."

"I see. And you're still married?"

"No. I'm divorced."

Aaron was scribbling in his notebook. "How long have you been divorced?"

"Since right after Carina was killed."

"Did you get along with Carina?"

"Yes. Well, as much as we were together. We didn't really spend any time together. I was always a little leery of her, just showing up out of the blue to tell us she was our sister. But Dad knew about her, and it was obvious she was his daughter. Looked just like him," Evelyn said, and Maisey could detect the slightest bit of distaste when she

talked about her father and sister.

“How did you feel about Carina finding that money for your dad?”

“Money?” I don’t know who this woman thinks she’s fooling, but it’s not me. She’s the worst actress I’ve ever seen , Maisey thought. “I’m not sure what you’re talking?”

“Yes. You know what I’m talking about. The unclaimed property. You knew about that,” Aaron insisted.

“The unclaimed?”

“Ms.Coleman, we found the documents in your dad’s storage unit. Your brother knew about it. I have to believe that you did too,” Aaron said, his facial expression never changing.

“Oh, that money. I don’t really know anything much about it. I don’t know what happened to it.”

“Do you think Carina kept it?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never seen any of it. I didn’t need it, so I really didn’t think about it.” Bullshit , Maisey wanted to blurt out, but she didn’t.

“I see. And you didn’t mind that Carina would get part of everything when your father died?”

Maisey saw a muscle in the corner of Evelyn’s mouth twitch. “I felt like she wasn’t really entitled to it, but no one cared what I thought, and besides, she found it, so I didn’t have a say.”

“Where’s the money now?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know if she ever pursued it or not.” Dear god, she should stop lying. She’s making a fool of herself , Maisey thought. It was pitiful, really. If the woman was cast as a corpse, she’d have a hard time pulling off the part, even with no moving or speaking.

Maisey was startled at Aaron’s next question. “Is your ex-husband around? Could we speak with him?”

“Oh, he’s out of the country right now. I’m sure he’ll be glad to talk to you when he gets back.”

“Out of the country? How long will he be gone?”

Evelyn seemed unusually smug. “It’s hard to say. But I’ll let him know you want to talk to him.”

Aaron stood, so Maisey did too. “Sounds good. Thank you for your time, Ms.Coleman.”

“You’re quite welcome. Hope you’ll remember me when you need a home,” she called after them as Aaron opened the door for Maisey and stepped out behind her.

By the time Aaron got in the car, Maisey was ready. “She’s?”

“Lying,” Aaron interrupted. “I’m not sure what she’s lying about, but she’s lying about something.”

“That’s what I was going to say! But it’s not something?it’s everything. First off, she’s lying about her ex being out of the country.”

Aaron laughed. “Yeah, unless the country is called the back room, because I’m pretty sure that’s who she was arguing with when we came in.”

“I think so too. But why would she lie about him being around?”

Aaron seemed to be mulling something over. “I don’t know, but I feel like we need to track him down.”

“How do we do that?”

“Easiest way? Go through the court dockets and look for the divorce proceedings. I know the court clerk. I’ll get her to find it.”

“Sounds good. Maybe that’ll tell us something.”

“Yep. But for now, let’s get some lunch and then you can get back to work. So can I. I’ll go to the courthouse first thing.” The cruiser stopped in the parking lot of one of their favorite sandwich shops and Aaron turned to smile at Maisey. “We’ll track all of this down and get some answers, babe. I promise.”

“Thanks. I know.” There were a lot of things Maisey didn’t know, but there was one she knew for sure. Aaron would do whatever it took to make sure her life was happy and stress-free, and she loved him for it. She had no doubt that they’d figure it out, but she hoped it was soon.

She really, really wanted to wear those boots!

CHAPTER FIVE

Everything was laid out and she was getting out the plates and flatware when the front door opened. She looked up and smiled as she chirped out, “Hey, babe!”

Aaron took off his jacket and hung it on the coat-tree by the door, then unbuckled his tool belt and headed to the bedroom. “Hey, sweetie.”

“Have a good afternoon?”

There was no answer from him until he walked back into the kitchen. “Yes. But I got a surprise.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s no divorce on file for Evelyn Coleman and her husband.”

“What about a marriage certificate?”

“Yeah. Ivy looked. There’s definitely a marriage certificate, but no divorce decree.”

Maisey stood there for a second, shocked. “What does that mean?”

“Well, first and foremost, it means that’s another lie she told us,” Aaron said and popped a cherry tomato into his mouth.

“But why? Why would she lie and say they were divorced?”

“I have no clue. I’ve been playing that over and over in my head all afternoon and I can’t come up with an answer.”

“Wait! What if she said they’re divorced because she wishes they were? There’s no decree, but have there been other filings?” Something was rolling around in Maisey’s brain.

“That I don’t know. Didn’t check. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking... I’m thinking... I’m not sure what I’m thinking, but I’ll know when I think it,” she said, her mind racing. “But I do know it means that I need to put those boots on again tonight.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Aww, babe, do you have to? I was hoping for a little, you know... tonight.”

“Yes. I have to. The sooner I figure it out, the better off we’ll all be and this will be over.”

“Okay. I guess you’re right. But we get this one over with and no more, please?”

Maisey shook her head. “I didn’t go looking for this one. Totally accidental.”

Murielle entertained them all through dinner with tales of the things that had happened in class that day. “So what did you learn in school today?” Aaron asked as she started to wind down.

“How to cast a spell on a bad person.”

Maisey almost laughed as Aaron’s eyebrows shot up and he asked, “Your class learned how to cast a spell on a bad person?”

Murielle never looked up, just stabbed a piece of macaroni with her fork and answered, “I don’t know what everybody else learned, but I learned how to cast a spell on a bad person.” It took everything Maisey had to keep from laughing out loud, especially at Aaron. He looked like he’d swallowed a cocklebur whole.

“And what kind of spell did you cast on the bad person?” Maisey asked Murielle.

“I casted a shut-up spell.”

“Did it work?”

“Well, she shut up, so I reckon it did.”

“Well, there ya go!” Maisey chirped and grinned at Aaron, who was still sitting there looking somewhere between confused and horrified. “Who is this you needed to cast a spell on?”

“Her name’s Olea. She’s mean to me. She told me I was ugly and my feet stink, and she’s gonna make all my friends hate me.”

“First off, your feet don’t stink,” Aaron assured her.

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you’re not ugly.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And how exactly does she plan to make your friends hate you?” he asked.

“I dunno, but they don’t. Margreeth told her to go suck a dick.”

“WHAAA?” Aaron belted out.

“Margreeth said that?” Maisey squawked out.

“Yeah. What does that mean? I don’t know what that means,” Murielle said, her eyes wide.

“It’s something very, very bad. Don’t ever say that,” Maisey told her, all the while fearing Aaron would explode. “Just don’t.”

“Okay. Doesn’t matter. I casted that spell on her and she shut up, so that’s good enough. And I drew a picture and left it on her desk so she knows I mean business.”

“What’s it a picture of?” Maisey asked, but she was afraid of the answer.

“It’s a dragon with fire coming out of its nose and an arrow through it so it’ll die.” Murielle had gone back to eating and seemed totally unconcerned with any of the rest of the conversation.

“I suppose it could’ve been a lot worse,” Aaron muttered.

“Yeah, I was gonna make a dragon with fire coming out of its nose and an arrow through it so it’ll die and poop coming out of it while it was flying. You know, turds falling outta its butt.”

Her laughter barely contained, Maisey said, “Yeah, well, I don’t think the poop would’ve made it any more real for her. That would’ve just made her laugh, and you don’t want her to laugh.”

“No. I don’t. That means she’s happy, and I don’t want her to be happy. I don’t want her to be sad either. I just want her to shut up.” Murielle gobbled up the last bite of

her macaroni and cheese and grinned up at them. “May I leave the table, please?”

“Yes, ma’am. You did a good job of eating your dinner. Got homework?” Aaron asked.

“No. I did it at school. So can I play a video game in my room?”

Aaron nodded. “Yes. But when I tell you it’s time for bed, you have to stop.”

“Okay, Daddy. I will. Thanks.” She ran around the table to where Aaron sat and kissed him on the cheek. “Love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, punkin’.”

To Maisey’s surprise, she rounded the table and kissed her stepmother on the cheek too. “Love you, Mommy.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.” Maisey watched as Murielle jetted down the hallway and disappeared into her room. “I love that child,” she whispered.

“I know. And I love that you love her. But what is with these kids? She’s ugly and her feet stink? And her friends will hate her? And dragons with flames and arrows and shitting as they fly?”

Maisey couldn’t hold her laughter anymore. “Babe, that’s totally tame compared to some of what I hear!”

Aaron shook his head. “I could never do your job.”

“Yeah. That’s why they pay me the big bucks, babe,” she said with a grin. “So, wanna watch some TV until it’s time for her to go to bed?”

“Sure! I guess. But no dragons and no poop,” Aaron insisted.

“Agreed.”

TV shows finished and video game playing over, Maisey and Aaron tucked Murielle into bed and headed for the deck, the boots gripped in Maisey’s hands. They both took seats on the deck furniture, and Maisey looked at the boots. They looked so harmless and so cute, but their secret was deadly. “Ready?” she asked Aaron when they were settled.

“I should be asking you that.”

She shook her head. “I’m never ready, but it has to be done.” Without another thought, she slipped the left boot on, and when her foot was firmly seated in the right one, it started.

The blackness enveloped her, but the tiny specks of light she’d seen in the earlier vision were now larger, and she recognized the streetlights on the other side of the houses out by the street and the light coming through back windows up and down the alley. She could feel the fingers closing around her neck, and she fought off the fear that she’d experienced before. Did she recognize his voice? No. Not at all, but it was indeed the same voice she’d heard before.

As before, Carina screamed, “What are you doing? Stop! You’re hurting me!”

He laughed, a sound that made pure dread run up Maisey’s spine. “Hurting you? Bitch, you’re gonna be nothing but a memory in a few minutes, and it’ll be your fault. Where’s that paperwork?”

She no longer tried to kick the boots off. She needed to hear what was coming, to see if she could determine who the man was. “How is it my fault? I’m doing it to help my

dad! That's all!" Carina gurgled.

"Just hand over the paperwork and this will stop!"

"They wouldn't even... know about it... if it wasn't... for me." Carina was almost past the point of speaking and suffering from lack of oxygen.

The laughing. It was painful to hear as he spoke. "Yeah, so thanks for that! All of you can just go to hell for all I care." Even though his voice was growing dim, Maisey stared up into his face with Carina's slowly-dying eyes and could tell a little bit more about his features than before.

Carina lost consciousness and Maisey lost her connection. "Babe, you okay?" Aaron asked as he tugged the boots off her feet.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay," Maisey answered, rubbing her neck. She knew there was nothing wrong with it, but the sensation was strong.

"Anything new?"

"Yeah. I noticed something. I thought she said, 'I'm doing it to help Dad.' But that's not what she said. She said, 'I'm doing it to help my dad.' So it's not Kyle or Evelyn, because Lyle was their dad too."

"Right. Okay. They're no longer suspects. Now we have to figure out who it is. Did you see any more of his face?"

"Maybe a little, but it was unfamiliar."

"Can you look through some mugshot books?"

“Sure. I?” The sound of Aaron’s phone blasted through the room.

“Gotta get this. It’s Carly. Hey,” he said as he answered, but his face instantly hardened. “Yeah. That’s right. When? Is he... Okay. Yeah. Thanks for letting me know. So... Wow. Okay. Sure. Tomorrow morning. Thanks, sheriff.”

The look on his face scared Maisey. “What’s going on?”

“Carly just got a call from the sheriff over in BoydCounty. He got called to the hospital in Ashland to interview a victim. KyleFenton.”

Maisey’s heart almost stopped. “Kyle? What happened?”

“Seems somebody almost beat him to death. And Carly said SheriffMcWherter told her Kyle isn’t talking. Wanted to know if we’d come talk to him tomorrow morning, see if we could get anything out of him.”

“Of course! But wait. How did he know to call Carly?”

“Carly called the sheriff and told him we were going over there to talk to Kyle so he wouldn’t hear from somebody else that a WhitleyCounty deputy had been talking to somebody in his county. Just typical law enforcement courtesy.” She sat silently until Aaron asked, “Babe, what are you thinking?”

“I’m not sure. This just seems too random to be random, if that makes sense.”

“Oh, I agree completely. That’s why we’re going to question him tomorrow.”

“Good. I hope he’ll talk to us.” She really did. Things were beginning to feel very unsettling, and she didn’t like the thoughts that were crossing her mind. Something was wrong. Somewhere along the line, they were either missing information, or

someone had told them a lie they hadn't picked up on.

And she needed to know which it was so she could get the whole picture.

First thing the next morning, Maisey got a call about an emergency placement, and there was no one else to take care of it. By the time she was finished, it was almost noon, so she called Cheryl to see if they could pick up Murielle from school and let her stay with them. Her friend said she was happy to, so as soon as they'd had a bite to eat, they hit the road for Ashland.

The hospital there was larger than the one in Corbin, twice as big, and was part of the University of Kentucky healthcare system. Kyle was on the fourth floor, so they rode the elevator, and Aaron checked in at the nurses' desk. When they reached the room, he knocked quietly and heard a muffled response. "Kyle Fenton?"

"Yeah." Recognition didn't register on his face when they stepped inside the room.

"I'm Deputy Friedman and this is my wife, Maisey. We just talked to you the other day."

"I don't have anything to say."

"Mr. Fenton, unless you talk to someone, we're not going to figure out who did this to you. Do you know who it was?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

“Is there anyone who would want to hurt you?”

“No.”

“Did the person say anything to you? Ask you anything? Tell you anything?”

“No.”

“They didn’t look familiar at all?”

“No.”

“Were you inside?”

“Yes.”

“How did they get in?”

“I don’t know.”

Maisey watched the whole exchange with curiosity and a good bit of suspicion. It was obvious to her that Kyle knew more than he was saying, and she had to believe Aaron picked up on it too. As she observed, she could see the man growing more and more tense, stiff even, and even a little agitated. It was fear, from what she could tell.

“So there’s nothing you can tell us? Height? Weight? Hair or eye color? Identifying marks?”

“No. Nothing.”

“I see. Well, I’ll leave you my card in case you remember something. If so, please

give me a call. I'd really appreciate it." Instead of answering, Kyle gave Aaron a curt nod and turned his face toward the window.

They stepped out into the hallway and Aaron pulled the door closed behind them. Maisey didn't get a chance to speak before Aaron whispered, "He's lying."

"He absolutely is. I can feel it. There's something much larger going on here."

"I've got to run by the sheriff's office here and let them know that I didn't get anything out of him and then we can go on home. How's that?"

Maisey gave him a little smile. "Sure. Sounds good."

She'd brought a book to read, so Maisey stayed in the cruiser while Aaron went inside. When he came out, he slid into the driver's seat and they took off. They'd only made it about ten miles south of Lexington when Aaron's phone rang again. "Shit. Forgot to call Carly. Hey, sheriff," he called out.

Carly's voice came over the onboard Bluetooth system. "Aaron, you went to Ashland, right?"

"Yep, and couldn't get a damn word out of Kyle. I stopped and talked to SheriffMcWherter to tell him?"

"Where are you now?"

"About ten miles outside Lexington on the Corbin side."

"Turn around and go back. I got a call from the FayetteCounty sheriff. They just got called to the home of a LanceColeman. Ring any bells?"

“Would that be Evelyn Coleman’s husband?”

“Yep. Seems somebody broke into his place, roughed him up, and threatened him. And when you find out why, you’ll be surprised. Go. I’ll shoot you the address.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Thank you.” And the car went quiet.

“I suppose I should call Cherilyn and tell her we’re going to be later than we thought,” Maisey mumbled.

“Looks that way. Is this when one of us is supposed to say, ‘And the plot thickens’?”

“I do believe it is.”

Fifteen minutes later, Aaron pulled up to the curb in front of the apartment complex that appeared to be Lance Coleman’s home, only to find two other sheriff’s department cruisers already there. A deputy met them on the sidewalk. “Hey. You must be Deputy Friedman. I’m Deputy Akers.”

“Hey! Yep, that’s me, and this is my wife, Maisey.” The man extended his hand and Maisey took it. Something about him made her feel instantly at ease, but that was in direct contrast to how she felt standing there. For some reason, she wanted to run back to the cruiser, throw herself into the back seat, and hide.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am. Y’all have at him. He’s already told us quite a bit, but I hear this could dovetail into a murder investigation you have going?”

“Yes. We’re trying to piece the whole thing together.”

“I’m not sure how much this will help you, but it may mean something. You’re welcome to try, and I hope you’ll keep us in the loop.”

Aaron nodded. “We absolutely will, and thanks.”

DeputyAkers tipped his hat to Maisey and turned to go, but as he walked away, he called out, “Good luck. You’re gonna need it.”

They stepped into the house to find themselves in the middle of madness. There were two EMTs trying to work on a man sitting on a kitchen chair, but he was so distraught that he couldn’t even sit still. “I have to call her! Please! Stop and let me call her!”

“Sir, if you’ll just let us treat you, we can be on our way and?”

“You don’t understand! Nobody understands! She could be in danger!” he wailed.

Aaron stepped up into the melee. “Mr.Coleman?”

“Yes! I’m LanceColeman! Can you help me?”

“Sir, I’ll try. Can you tell me what happened here?”

“He came right in through the front door like he owned the place! In broad daylight! Who does that?” he shrieked.

“Who was he?”

“How the hell should I know?” Lance bellowed.

“Sir, you need to... Fellas, can you give us a minute?” Aaron asked the two EMTs.

The younger of the two stammered, “B-b-b-b-but we’re almost?”

“Won’t take more than a minute, and maybe he’ll be in better shape to receive help after we’re finished, okay?” The two first responders shrugged, stood, and walked away. “Now, Mr.Coleman, you never saw the man before?”

“No. Never.”

“What did he say?”

“He knocked me around a bit and then he said, ‘Go sign the fucking papers. If you do that, I’ll only have to kill her and you can walk away. If you don’t sign them, I’ll have to kill you first, and either way, she dies. So save yourself, idiot.’ Those were his exact words as well as I can remember. My ears were ringing and I was in pain.”

“Yes, sir. I get that, and it’s pretty remarkable that you remembered that much. Let me ask you: Can you describe the man?”

“Uh...” Lance began, then stopped.

“Just give it a few seconds. Think. Close your eyes if you need to and really think.”

“Uhhh...” Maisey wasn’t sure how long it was, but Lance finally said, “Okay. Maybe six feet? Hard to say much else because he was wearing a hoodie.” What the hell is it with these fucking hoodies? Maisey wanted to scream. “White guy. Couldn’t see his eyes that well. But he had a mustache. You know, one of those seventies mustaches like Tom Selleck.”

“Got it. Was he dark complected? Fair?”

“Um, I’m thinking maybe medium?”

“Okay. Good. That’s really good. Now think really hard. Was there anything unusual about him? A scar? A tattoo? A lisp or stutter? Anything at all?”

“Uhhh... One of his front teeth was broken off.”

“Which one?”

The man closed his eyes, then opened them again. “The left one.”

He might as well have slapped Maisey in the face. That was the problem with the man’s smile—he had a broken front tooth! She didn’t realize she’d closed her eyes, but when she opened them and glanced at Aaron, his eyebrows were hiked up, and she knew what he wanted to ask her, so she nodded. Instantly, he asked Lance, “If we got a sketch artist to sit with you, do you think you could describe the man?”

“Maybe.”

“We’ll make arrangements for it. Is there anything else you can think of that we need to know?”

“No. Just make sure Evelyn is okay! Please!” he whined out.

“We sure will. Right now. We’ll let the EMTs get back to you and we’ll go find Evelyn. She’ll be fine. And thank you for talking to us,” Aaron said and patted the man’s shoulder. “Everything’s gonna be fine.” Without another word, he turned toward the door and motioned for Maisey to precede him.

As soon as the car doors were closed, Aaron made a U-turn in the middle of the street. “Are we going to find Evelyn?” Maisey asked.

“You’d better believe it.” Maisey sat back and watched traffic as Aaron sped through

the streets of Lexington, making his way back to the real estate office. When he reached it, there was already a police cruiser sitting out front. “Wait here,” he told Maisey, and she nodded.

When he came out twenty minutes later, he sighed as he slid behind the steering wheel. “Did she say anything?” Maisey asked.

“No. Not really. She seemed surprised, and I could tell from her tone of voice and her expression that she was scared. I don’t think she knows what this is about, so I told her what Lance said. She said he’s been trying to call her for an hour and I told her maybe she’d better take his call. The officer and I had a conversation. She won’t be alone until we or they get a handle on this. I was concentrating so much on getting here that I didn’t bother to ask you if anything Lance said made sense, but I caught your eye. The guy in your vision has a broken front tooth, right?”

“Yes. Left one. I hope he can give a sketch artist something to work with. I’d really like to see that sketch.”

“Oh, you’ll see it. Trust me. You can bet on that. Ready to go home now? No matter what, we’re not turning around and coming back. Let FayetteCounty and Lexington city take care of it.”

“Good. I’m tired.” She was also a little scared. So far, two people involved in whatever it was had been hurt, and she was pretty sure it had to do with that unclaimed property. But what? The whole thing seemed wonky and disjointed. There was something they were missing, but what was it?

Whatever it was, only one thing was certain. As long as the murderer left her, her friends, and her family alone, nothing else mattered, at least not to her.

Maisey had just finished testifying in family court to the improvements a mother had

made in her parenting skills when she slid into her car's front seat and checked her messages. She had three voicemails and two texts from Aaron, so she opened the text app.

Where are you?

Her fingers flew across the screen.

I've been in court for an hour and a half. What's going on?

Three dots wagged on the screen and the reply came up.

Come to the sheriff's office.

Without responding, Maisey started her car and headed that direction. When she pulled up and stepped inside, Aaron was there at the front, leaning against the counter in the reception area. "What's the big deal?" Maisey asked.

"I was worried about you. We got the sketch back." Without another word, he turned and headed down the hallway, so Maisey followed, hustling to keep up. Aaron stopped just past the conference room door and motioned for her to go inside, and he followed her in. "You'd better sit down."

"What's going on?"

"Look familiar?"

Aaron slid a piece of paper across the table to her from his seat there and when it reached her, she turned it over. "Oh my god," Maisey whispered.

"I see you recognize him."

“Yes. That’s him.”

Aaron opened a folder in front of him. “Name’s Monty Leffler. Worked for a loan shark. From what we can tell, the guy he worked for mysteriously disappeared and Monty’s been hitting up every mark he had. He’s looking for money. But we don’t know his connection to Carina, although we know it has something to do with the unclaimed property.”

White-hot rage passed through Maisey. “It’s pretty clear who’s at the middle of this.”

“Kyle? He’s the one who took a beating.”

“No. It’s Evelyn. She’s the only one who hasn’t been touched yet.”

Aaron nodded. “Maybe. We’ve put out an all-points bulletin for Leffler. So if it’s Evelyn, what’s her game? And how does Leffler fit in?”

Maisey’s head was spinning. “I don’t know. Maybe it was Kyle. I’m so confused.”

“I think a trip to the monastery is in order, don’t you?”

Maisey stood. “Let’s go.”

The Monastery of Our Lady of Perpetual Benevolence outside Richmond or, more properly, in Paint Lick, was an imposing structure of Kentucky limestone, quarried right there in the region and built in the late eighteen hundreds. It had been there for so long that it blended right into its surroundings and regardless it’s immensity, it would’ve been hard to spot for someone not looking for it. Large trees surrounded it, and it was more like a retreat than a working monastery.

On the way there, Aaron had called ahead, and they were to meet with a

FatherTheodoro at the main entrance. Sure enough, a brown-robed cleric stood there by the door, waiting. “You must be Deputy and Mrs.Friedman,” the man said, holding out a hand. To Maisey’s delight, he took her hand, then pressed his other on top of their joined ones. She thought that was charming, and it was soothing too.

“We are, Father, and thank you for taking the time to talk to us,” Aaron said as the man took his hand and did exactly the same.

“I only came here a few months ago, so I had to pull the file on BrotherCalvin. Took me awhile because I didn’t know his real name. Had to ask around. BrotherDaniel remembered him. Come, come, have a seat in my office.” They followed the thin man with the belted gown until they reached a small room with a desk and a lot of papers everywhere. “I apologize for the mess. I’m just now getting in the swing of things here.” He motioned toward the chairs in front of his desk, so Aaron and Maisey sat. “Now, how can I help you?”

“So Kyle ... Brother Calvin told us?”

“No, he’s just Kyle now. When he left the order, he ceased to be BrotherCalvin.”

“Oh. Didn’t know how that worked.”

The monk’s smile was kind. “Quite all right.”

“Thank you. So Kyle left. Does your file show why?”

“Of course. Says he was released from the shelter of our monastery for conduct unbecoming a member of the order.”

“He told us he fell in love with a woman and left because of her, only to have her die a few weeks before their wedding.”

FatherTheodoro took off his glasses, folded the earpieces in, and laid them on top of the desk's bounty of papers. "She wasn't just a woman. She had been a nun, and she left the order a year or so before he was pushed out. They probably met through some activity we all did together."

"Oh holy go... oodness. Holy goodness," Aaron stuttered and caught himself. "A nun?"

"Yes. So they both knew the ramifications of their behavior."

"And that's a reason to kick him out?"

"He took a vow of chastity when he came here. He knew his actions would invalidate his vows. When the abbot confronted him, he broke down crying and told FatherToliver that he was in love with her."

"I see. And he was in love with who?" Maisey caught Aaron's eye and frowned, so he tried again. "Whom?" That made her smile.

"Her name was OpalStarnes. She'd been SisterOpal at the convent of the Sisters of the Holy Resurrection in Newport. When she left the order, she came back to Richmond to work at her family's bakery and be closer to him, I presume."

"I see. Did he ever mention his family? Maybe a younger sister?"

"Doesn't mention them in his file. There's nothing in there about his people."

"I see. Well, thank you for your time. We really appreciate it."

The older man looked from Aaron to Maisey. "You haven't said one word, my daughter."

Maisey gave him a gentle smile. “No, Father. My husband is the detective. I let him ask questions.”

“But you’re in the middle of this, are you not? It’s your gift that brought you here today.” The man didn’t smile, just sat, his eyes focused on Maisey.

She knew he could sense it. There was more than one person in that room at that moment who had a gift. “That’s right, Father.”

“I know what some people of faith would say. They’d say you’re a fake. That your abilities come from Satan. But all good things are given as gifts from God, and you’re using yours to help others. How can that be from Satan?”

“I can tell you this, Father. I don’t know Satan, but I’ve now looked directly into his eyes twice, so if I see him, I know him,” Maisey replied, surprised at the strength of her voice.

“Yes, I can understand that. Once one meets Satan face to face, they’re never the same. Life is more precious, and each step more precarious. Is this not true?”

Maisey nodded. “Indeed it is, Father.”

“Then godspeed, my young friend. I hope you manage to put whatever this is to bed soon and with the least amount of damage possible.”

“Thank you. Me too.” Maisey was startled. It was as though the old monk had looked directly into her soul, but she hadn’t felt threatened. She’d actually felt like she’d found a kindred soul.

The drive home was uneventful, and Aaron stopped at the office. “I’ll be home in just a few. Gotta put in for my mileage and the like. I’ll pick up Murielle from school on

my way home.”

“Okay. See you when you get there,” she said and gave him a quick kiss before she climbed into her car and took off.

As soon as she pulled the car into the driveway, Maisey felt a sense of dread sweep over her. Where was that coming from? Briefcase retrieved from the back seat, she made her way up the front steps onto the porch, then stuck the key in the lock and turned it. The door swung open effortlessly, but as soon as it closed, she felt something against the back of her neck. “Where is it?” a voice growled, and she recognized it.

“Where is what?” she whispered, knowing full well what he meant.

“Give it to me and you won’t have to be hurt.”

“I’m really not worried about that, Monty.” She had a plan, but that was on a need-to-know basis, and he didn’t need to know.

“How do you know my name?”

“The sketch Lance helped the police artist work up was very effective. Once they had that, it took the police about two whole minutes to identify you.”

The sound of the hammer on the gun cocking chilled Maisey. “Get the paper. Now.”

“Okay, okay. It’s over here. Let me find it.” Maisey scrambled to the coffee table, prowling through the papers in the file there. “It’s here somewhere.” As she prowled, she managed to slip her hand under the edge of the coffee table and press the panic button Aaron had put there. “I don’t see it, but I know it was there earlier. You have it already, don’t you?” she argued.

“No! I don’t have it, but you’ll have a hole in your head if you don’t come up with it soon.”

“I know what you said to her, and I know what she said to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Carina Williamson. Out in that alley. You said, ‘Bitch, you’re gonna be nothing but a memory in a few minutes, and it’ll be your fault. Where’s that paperwork?’ And she said, ‘How is it my fault? I’m doing it to help my dad! That’s all!’”

She could see his hand tremble. “How do you know that?”

“I just do. I was there.”

“No you weren’t! What the fuck? Are you some kind of witch or something? Find that fucking paperwork before I kill you right now. You’re creeping me out.”

“Oh! Here it is. Right here. Take it and go,” she said, handing him the first thing she saw. It wasn’t the document, but he wasn’t going to notice.

“Oh, no. You’re going with me. Come on.” With the gun jammed into the back of her neck, Maisy let him push her out the front door, but she stopped dead as soon as the door closed behind them. “Move it!”

“Can you at least just let me lock the door? I don’t want anybody else rummaging through the house. If you kill me, my husband will need the info for all of my arrangements,” she said, but the whole time she was talking, only one thing was running through her mind. Please, please, somebody in this neighborhood, step outside. Please, some nosy neighbor, now is the time. Please, please, come out and?

“Hey, Maisey! How ya doin’?” a female voice called out, and both she and Monty turned to look.

“Oh, I’m fine, Mrs.Halvorsen. How are you?”

“Well, I’m ’bout fair to middlin’. Got this pain in my ankle and it’s?” As the neighbor kept talking, Maisey saw her opportunity. She pushed the door open only as wide as necessary, slipped inside, slammed it shut, and turned the deadbolt.

“Open this door!” Monty yelled from the other side and started to bang on the wood of the door, but Maisey was already on the move. She made sure the deadbolt was locked, ran to the bathroom, closed and locked the door, and pressed Aaron’s contact.

“Hey, babe, I saw where the alarm went off. Did you accidentally?”

“Monty’s here! God, Aaron, he’s got a gun! He had me at gunpoint and?”

“All units, this is Deputy SheriffFriedman requesting all available units assist. Armed suspect and hostage situation at...” Maisey heard him call out their address over the radio and held her breath. He was radioing everyone anywhere near there, and in seconds there would be cruisers swarming their street.

“You bitch! I’ll be back for you!” she heard Monty scream from outside the front door, and then nothing.

Sirens filled the air in seconds, and Maisey took a deep breath. There were voices and a lot of pounding on the door. “Maisey! It’s DeputyVanCleave! Open the door! Please, Maisey! Open the door! Sheriff’s department!”

Maisey threw open the bathroom door and ran to the front door. When it opened, VanCleave was standing there, and she began to sob. Instead of just asking her what

was happening, he took her in his arms and held her while she cried. Instantly, there were officers everywhere, each of them stopping to check on her before they began their work of dusting for fingerprints, trying to collect evidence, and do whatever else was necessary. In under a minute, there was a hand on her shoulder and a familiar voice whispered, “Thank you, VanCleave. I’ll take it from here.”

Maisey spun and fell into Aaron’s arms. Everything inside her broke open, and she sobbed. She heard VanCleave tell him, “I’m just glad I was here for her. We’re gonna get this sumbitch, Aaron. He can’t do something like this to one of ours and get away with it. Maisey, honey, you’ll be fine. We’re all here for you.” Before she could turn to thank VanCleave, he was gone, on to do the work he was trained for, and she was thankful for him in that moment.

“Come sit down and tell me everything.” Aaron helped her to the sofa and they sat down side by side.

“He was in the house when I stepped in. I knew something was wrong. I could feel the energy outside, but I didn’t realize the danger.”

“It’s okay. We’re all here.”

“He wanted the paper for the unclaimed property. I gave him something. Don’t even know what it was. But that’s what he wanted.”

Aaron shrugged. “He can’t do anything with it unless he can prove he’s a relative, and he can’t.”

That was the moment she understood. “He could if he took Kyle’s identity.”

She watched Aaron’s face. “Oh holy hell. That’s what he’s going to do.” Aaron pulled his phone from his pocket.

“Jesus, Maise, you okay?” a feminine voice asked, and Maisey looked up to see Carly rush into the house. She strode toward her friend and leaned down to hug Maisey.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“What can I do to help?”

“We’ve figured it out,” Aaron told his friend and boss. “Evelyn and LanceColeman need to be in protective custody. Leffler’s looking for the paperwork for the unclaimed property, and now he thinks he’s got it. Kyle’s in the hospital, so he’s going to Kyle’s apartment to get enough documentation to steal Kyle’s identity. Once he’s done that, he’ll kill Evelyn and Lance to make sure neither of them have a claim on the money, and he’ll file for it and get it. Then, when he gets a confirmation, he’ll kill Kyle. He’s got to be stopped now before all hell breaks loose and we have three more dead family members on our hands.”

“I’ll issue a statewide alert. Wherever he is, they’ll find him. And you,” Carly said and pointed at her friend. “Get some rest. It’s time to pick up Murielle, right?”

“Oh, shit!” Aaron spewed. “I totally forgot!”

“I’ll go pick her up and bring her home. You two get yourselves pulled together. Before you finish dinner tonight, we’ll have MontyLeffler in custody.”

“I certainly hope so,” Maisey mumbled. For some reason, she still didn’t think everything was okay.

But hopefully it would be soon.

CHAPTER SIX

Aaron had been putting in so many hours on Carina's case that it was hard for him to get his regular caseload done, so his plan for the day was to stay at the office and work. Maisy had to admit to herself that she was glad. She needed a break from Carina's world. It had become a bit overwhelming.

The only admonishment he'd given her that morning was to stay close to the Child Protective Services' office, and that was exactly what she intended to do. She'd been at work for about an hour when her phone rang. "Hey, babe!"

"Hi, sweetie. Having a good morning?"

"So far, so good. What's up?"

She could hear squeaking, and she knew Aaron was tipping back in his desk chair. "So after we talked about it, I did some more checking. There has been paperwork filed for a divorce between Evelyn and Lance, but it's never been finalized. Apparently all it's missing is Lance's signature."

"Wait. So Evelyn says they're divorced. We didn't ask Lance about it. What's the holdup?"

Aaron chuckled. "There's only one reason I can think of."

"Yeah. He wants part of that money when Evelyn gets it."

“Bingo. I think that’s it.”

Something else flitted through Maisey’s mind as she remembered the feeling that had poked at her when they interviewed Lance, and when it settled, a shiver ran up her spine. “No. He thought he’d get all of the money.”

“He’ll get half of it in the divorce settlement. Community property and all that,” Aaron reminded her. “In the state of Kentucky, he’ll get half?”

It hit Maisey like a runaway train. “Unless she’s dead.”

There was silence for a few seconds before Aaron said, “I think I’d better check on Evelyn.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll call you back, babe. Love you. Bye.” Before Maisey could get another word in edgewise, Aaron had hung up.

No matter what she did, Maisey couldn’t concentrate on her work. Things kept spinning through her mind, over and over, and there was no way to sit still. The more she thought about it all, the surer she was that they were missing some vital piece of the puzzle. When lunchtime finally came, she grabbed her bag and decided to walk the three blocks to the pie shop where she sometimes had lunch. Walking would give her time to think. She’d made it a whole block before her phone pinged, and she checked to find a message from Aaron.

Just talked to Evelyn. She’s fine. Lance stayed the night at her place so she wasn’t alone.

Just like a slot machine’s reels spinning, one by one, everything fell into place. The reason why there had been an attempt on Kyle’s life. The reason why Lance was

attacked. The horrible energy she'd encountered at Lance's wasn't from Lance. It was left over from the other person who'd been there. Monty had told Lance to sign the papers so he wouldn't have to kill both him and Evelyn, but that had been the lie. He'd never intended to kill Evelyn. He wouldn't.

Maisey stopped at the corner to check for traffic, but before she could step across, a car pulled up in front of her and the window went down. "Mrs.Friedman?" a voice asked, and she peered into the vehicle.

It was Lance.

She knew exactly what was happening, and if she got into that car, she was as good as dead. His voice was low as he said, "They told me to pick you up and bring you to them or they'll kill me."

"And if I get into that car with you, they'll kill us both."

Lance shook his head. "No. I'll sign the divorce paperwork and they'll let us go."

"Why do they need me for you to sign the divorce paperwork?"

"They're going to make you give them the unclaimed property paperwork."

"I can't do that, Lance."

To her surprise, Lance raised a weapon and pointed it at her. "Please, god, I don't want to hurt you. Please just get in the car. They're watching us right now, so you have to come with me. Please?"

"No, Lance. I'm not getting into the car." Somebody please honk or something! Make a distraction! Maisey's brain whispered. She needed a chance to run, and if only...

“Hey, asshole! You’re in the loading zone! Get the fuck outta the way!” a guy driving a large delivery truck yelled from the street as he pulled up behind Lance’s car.

As soon as Lance glanced in the rearview mirror, Maisey took her opportunity and bolted. She was super thankful she’d changed into athletic shoes before she took off walking to the pie shop, and she darted here and there, hoping no one was following her. Turning down an alley, she groaned when she realized it didn’t go all the way through, and she managed to slip behind a large dumpster to hide. By leaning out just a little, she could see the street, and she watched as Lance’s car drove past, then drove past again going the opposite direction. She was about to tiptoe to the entrance of the alley for a quick look-around when she heard voices.

“She’s gotta be here somewhere! I know she came in here,” she heard a voice say, and she knew it was Lance’s.

“Yeah? Well, where is she?” a female voice asked, and she recognized it immediately ?Evelyn.

“I don’t know! I did what you told me, and I?”

“You let her get away, that’s what you did!” a male voice snapped, and Maisey knew that was Monty. Everything was getting clearer and clearer, and she totally understood what was happening.

“I didn’t do it on purpose! I was trying to do what you guys told me to do! I was?”

Pop! interrupted Lance’s whining, and she heard the sound of a body hitting the ground. Fear like she’d never known overwhelmed Maisey. Monty had a silencer on the weapon, and no one would know anyone had been shot. But who was it? Her suspicion that it was Lance was confirmed when Evelyn said, “Shame that had to happen.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t leave us much choice. Now, we’ve got to find that woman. We get her house key, we go in, take the documents, then we’re home free.”

“No, we’re not, idiot. There’s still the issue of my brother’s death-defying recovery.”

“I swear, baby, I thought the bastard was dead, but I’ll take care of him once and for all.”

Baby? Yep. These two are together! It had seemed totally unlikely, but Maisie had seen crazier things, that was for sure. And she had her confirmation. Evelyn and Monty... Ugh. That’s just gross , Maisie told herself. But she didn’t have time to think about that. They had the alley blocked. How was she going to get out of there?

From where she hid, she could see a doorway on the far side of the alley. If she could just make it to that door and it was unlocked, she could get away. If not, they’d grab her. From somewhere to her left, she could hear laughter, and it grew louder. Ah, somebody walking past on the sidewalk out there! Maisie waited and, sure enough, it was two young women, laughing and talking. By leaning to the left, she could see the end of the alley, as well as Evelyn and Monty. As soon as the women came into view, Maisie took off.

The door was unlocked, and she threw it open and ran, listening to Evelyn and Monty yell from somewhere behind her. Without even slowing, she darted through the store, which turned out to be Warwick’s Hardware. As she went, she grabbed things on the shelves and pulled them onto the floor, especially bigger things like shovels, cans of paint, and open boxes of nails and screws. Monty and Evelyn were screaming and shouting, trying to chase her, but Maisie kept running. When she burst through the front door, she stared straight into the barrels of three handguns, and Aaron’s voice barked, “Maisie! Get down!”

Maisie dropped face first to the sidewalk just as she heard Monty and Evelyn’s footsteps power out the door and onto the concrete. “Hands in the air!” Carly’s voice

rang out. “Up where we can see ’em! Get ’em up!” There was movement everywhere, and all Maisey could do was lie there and wait.

A hand touched her shoulder and Aaron’s voice whispered, “Hey, babe, get up. It’s okay. We’ve got ’em.”

“But how?”

“The truck driver who honked at Lance. He saw you jet from the car and figured something wasn’t quite right. Described the car, and when we found it out there on the street by the alley, we put it together. Vickers saw you run for the door just in time to radio us and tell us where you’d be coming out. We were planning to come in, but you bolted out the door before we could.”

A transmission came over Aaron’s comm unit. “Sheriff, it’s Vickers. We’ve got a body in the alley, over.”

“Roger that, Vickers. Be there in just a second. Over.” Carly turned to Aaron. “You’ve got these two. I’ll go help him.”

“Roger that, sheriff. We’ve got them.” For the first time since she’d burst from the front of the building, Maisey looked around to see Deputy Sheriff Yeager standing there. She and Beverly Yeager had gone to high school together, and she was glad to see the familiar face.

“You okay?” Beverly asked her quietly.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Exhausted but fine.” Maisey turned to Aaron. “What tipped you off?”

“That Lance seemed concerned about Evelyn, even though he was the one who’d taken a beating. And she seemed totally unconcerned about her brother or Lance.

Killing Lance and Kyle would've guaranteed her the entirety of the unclaimed property. She would've left Lance completely out of it?"

"If he had just signed the divorce papers, which is what Monty told Carina when he killed her. Then they waited all this time?"

"Because Lyle was still alive. It wasn't until Lyle died that it became important to press for that. But Evelyn didn't know her dad had that stuff in a storage unit until it was too late and Cherilyn was there, bidding on all of it. She didn't know where the paperwork was, so she busied herself trying to get Lance to sign the divorce papers until..." Aaron stopped for a second, closed his eyes, and let out a breath. "Until we went to her office and she recognized you. She saw you at the auction that day with Cherilyn, and she figured out that she had a way to get the paperwork. And when we turned up to ask questions and she found out we'd talked to Kyle, she figured out that Cherilyn didn't have it anymore. We had it."

"She just assumed we were onto her, which we weren't yet. And she's how Monty knew to come looking for me."

"You figured it out, didn't you?" Aaron asked with a grin.

"The minute I got your text that Evelyn was fine and Lance pulled up in front of me, I knew it was her. She didn't actually kill anybody. She just got Monty to do it."

"Wrong. Turns out," Yeager said, looking at her phone, "according to Vickers and the sheriff, Evelyn's the one who pulled the trigger on Lance. So she'll go down for his murder."

Maisey nodded. "And Monty for Carina's and attempted murder for Kyle."

"Yep. So we've got it sewn up." Aaron wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "And Kyle will get whatever's in that unclaimed property. Plus he won't have anybody to

have to share it with.”

“Good. I think he earned it,” Maisey said, and she meant it.

And she wanted to be the one to tell Kyle.

“So I’m supposed to be dead?”

“Afraid so,” Aaron said with a nod.

Kyle’s face was sad. “So my sister and that thug could have the money.”

Aaron grimaced. “Yeah, they’d already been making plans. Trips out of the country, a big house, all that kind of stuff. Poor Lance. They could’ve had a good life together with her portion, but she was too greedy for that. She knew Monty would take it, but by being with Monty, she was guaranteed to at least get some of it.”

“But why didn’t Lance just sign the papers? He wanted the money that badly?” Kyle asked.

“No. I think he genuinely loved her. He didn’t want a divorce, but he also didn’t know who she’d gotten mixed up with. I mean, as soon as he thought her life was in danger, he went to her place to stay to keep her safe. That’s how they got hold of him,” Aaron explained. “He unknowingly stepped right into their trap in the name of protecting Evelyn, a woman who didn’t really love him. How sad is that?”

Kyle shook his head. “Pretty sad.”

“But the money will be yours now, and you won’t have to share it with anybody,” Maisey reminded him.

“No. I won’t. But I will. I’ll help Rachel. With her dad dead and her mom in prison,

she'll need me, and I'll gladly help her. I mean, I don't have any money right now, but when I get the unclaimed property, I can pay for her college and buy her a car, help her get a house."

"You can get a house too. Maybe you'll even meet someone!" Maisey said, hoping to encourage him.

"Nah. I like my apartment just fine, and dating shouldn't be something I'm even thinking about. I'd rather help Rachel. She should be my focus now," Kyle answered with a weak smile. "I've never had kids, and I didn't really get a chance to know Rachel that well, but now I'll have the time and the money to."

Maisey hoped he could see the admiration in her face as she gave him her warmest smile. "You're a good man, Kyle. Just get close to Rachel and let her know you want to be there for her. This is going to be the toughest time of her life. Hopefully it'll be easier from here on out."

"And if we can ever help you, please let us know." Aaron handed him another business card. "In case you tossed the last one," Maisey's husband added with a grin.

"Yeah. In case. Thanks again. By the way, you two make a good team," Kyle said, grinning.

"I hope we don't have to do this again!" Aaron said with a laugh, but Maisey knew what he was thinking.

Because she was thinking the exact same thing.

As soon as she got home, Maisey took a long, hot shower. Aaron was still at the office, finishing up paperwork, and he'd also picked up all the paperwork they'd had in the boxes and taken those cartons to the office with a texted promise to Kyle to bring him the cartons as soon as Evelyn and Monty's trials were over. The paperwork

for the property, however, they could photocopy so Kyle could get the ball rolling on that. She took her time dressing, then slipped on the boots and pulled the legs of her jeans down over them. They were adorable, especially since no dead woman was filling up space in her head while she had them on!

Aaron and Murielle came in, they all ate dinner, and when Murielle was finished with her homework and had her clothes for the next day picked out, she snuggled down in her bed, oblivious to the ruckus that had taken place earlier in the day. Maisey finished cleaning up the kitchen, started a load of laundry, and sashayed back into the living room where Aaron was straightening everything up out there. As soon as he saw her, he grinned. "The boots really are cute."

"I know, right? And they're comfortable too."

Aaron smirked. "And no dead women screaming in your head?"

"Nope." Maisey waited until he sat down, then took a seat beside him.

"Think you'll hear from her again?"

Maisey shook her head. "Nope."

Aaron sat there for a second, staring at her, then grinned. "You're not wearing something bright pink with fringe on it under those clothes, are you?"

Maisey chuckled. "Maybe."

His grin turned wicked. "Mind if I look?"

"Nope."

When he reached over to unbutton the top two buttons on her plaid shirt, she grabbed

his hands. “You don’t want me to see?” he asked, his eyebrows hiking up.

“Oh, I want you to see. But I want you to see behind closed doors. I don’t need Murielle watching me do any bronc busting.”

“Is that right?” Aaron stood and reached out his hand to help her stand, then held it and smiled. “And what would you say to thunderin’ off down that hallway to our own buckin’ chute and taking a whirl on a wild bronc?”

Without a second’s warning, Maisey took off, dragging him behind her. “I’d say, yeehaw! Ride ‘em, cowgirl!”

As the bedroom door closed behind them, Aaron laughed. “Think you can last eight seconds?”

“I dunno. Can you?”

“Oh, yeah, cowgirl,” he said, unbuttoning her shirt and staring at the slits in her bra. “Pretty sure I can.”

Maisey threw back her head and laughed. “I’m countin’ on it!”